

CRISIS ! 1992

A NOVEL

By

BENSON HERBERT

With a Preface by

M. P. SHIEL

RICHARDS

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TO
JIM
(J. C. H. COWEN, ESQ.)

*whose discussions concerning a certain mythical
planet which he named
IKON
have led to the conception of this story.*

*Thought followed thought, star followed star
Through boundless regions, on ;
While one sweet influence, near and far,
Thrilled through, and proved us one !*

EMILY JANE BRONTE.

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PREFACE

IN this little book the reader is presented with the most grandiose conception of the powers of living things that I, for my part, have yet come across ; to read it is to have one's mind enlarged as well as fascinated ; and throughout the reader feels safe with the writer, who is a scientist, having at his fingers' ends the vocabulary, writing in the vernacular, of scientists. He does not, indeed, pay enough attention to the moon, with whose orbit the presence of such a body as his " Arion " must have played havoc, nor is he troubled by any apprehension of " disruptive approach ", which both Terra and Arion must have felt—as when that planet outside Mars cracked-up at some too-close approach to Jupiter : for the motto of the heavenly bodies is "*Noli me tangere*, trespassers will be exploded ", the drag of gravity at some nearest point between two near bodies being greater than elsewhere, so that blisters occur there, and burst. But this is a detail lost in the splendour of the fancy of " Arion "—I say " fancy " rather than imagination, for we are not here shown anything in a shine that is both bright and strange : we do not *see* our author's " tree-men ", nor even those beasts with two heads and ten legs ; it is only the naïveté of manner with which they are presented that causes us to accept them at all. That naïveté is as pronounced as in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as in *Paul et Virginie*, and is as devoid as Jules

Verne of rockets and sound of trumpet ; the book might be a translation from French, and in a tale of this kind such a style of telling has a merit, tending to augment the *vraisemblance*—though no art of telling could camouflage the oddity of the “Arionians” having a flying-boat so like terrestrial flying-boats that men could understand and fly them ; moreover, the naïveté displays itself in a heaping up of details of too little significance, especially in the beginning. There is, besides, a page (269), strange for a scientist writer, which seems to mar the book by its agreement with the ignorant in their lack of reverence for the makers of civilisation . . . “It came to him how absurd was this talk of scientific progress, how empty and futile this ‘nobility’ of scientific endeavour. He realised the insignificance of all physical science, except in so far as it helped to make human beings a little happier . . .” A “little happier” than who? than apes? than cavemen? than Greeks, Romans, Galileans, everyone a leper, maimed or halt or blind, having a devil? In Rome sometimes to commit suicide was fashionable ; and no wonder—we should, too, if we had no matches, no paper, no doctors, nothing much to check the sigh, “life is sorrow”. We may say of the worst-off of us, “far happier” ; and should be able to say “very far”, if all science were already applied, especially the science of sociology. Indeed, of the two words “science”, “happiness”, only one is necessary, since science—i.e. knowledge of truth—is happiness : for no life—of Martian or man, of plant-cell or microbe—could exist six ticks without science ; and no life, no happiness. Nor is anything else needed to glorify science, since no living thing can care at all for any-

thing, except happiness : truth itself is better than untruth, pudding better than putty, only for the reason that truth and pudding make for happiness. As for the "nobility" of scientific endeavour, our author lost sight for a moment of the noble host who have died for mankind, experimenting on themselves, to obtain one ray more of science—hundreds of them—holier far than other martyrs, gallanter far than other vanguards of other armies. But, then, this is just a slip into commonness of thought absent elsewhere from a story-book which in some respects is among the best, and in one respect is the best (known to me) of its genus.

M. P. SHIEL.

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE NEW STAR

ON the 4th of April, 1992, Ilse Lieben was sitting in an electric passenger-car, reading a Bible. She was not reading it reverently, but hastily and rather anxiously, as she had been asked by a friend to take a Bible class. Now she was turning over the pages, trying to ascertain which writers wrote in which Testament.

Fräulein Ilse, an athletic girl of twenty-two, was the secretary of the Gräfin von Freiburg, the sociological writer. She was an expert fencer, and a member of a ladies' boxing club ; she was quick at languages, spoke Spanish like the Spaniards, and French like the Swiss.

After a time she began to turn the pages mechanically, and her thoughts wandered to her father, who was working studiously in the fuel laboratories.

"He works too hard," she muttered, "far too hard. And fancy working on a Sunday !"

But Herr Lieben thought nothing of working on a Sunday. Was he not one of the great pioneers of fuel, who had helped to make soaring machines possible, and ought not his daughter to be proud of him ? Only a few years ago, aeroplanes had to fly on internal-combustion engines—petrol blowing itself up, inside !—then, a spark of genius, came the great simplification,

the external-combustion engine—fuel blowing itself up, outside! As a result came the soaring machine, or “rocket”, as it used to be called, which could do things that no aeroplane could ever do.

In six months transportation had been transformed. Unheeding the fluttering pages of her Bible Ilse's mind went back to all the excitement and strangeness of those few months. She was just old enough to be able to remember them.

With the new fuels and metal alloys people built mechanical devices which could, in a crude and frequently fatal manner, ascend above the earth's atmosphere, and proceed through space by the powers of reaction. People experienced the awful thrill of leaving the earth completely behind. They came back, and demanded better fuel, and got it; better metal also, but they did not get that for a long time.

Ilse had read in the papers of the first flights to the moon; she recalled her father's jubilation at the wonderful news. There was also the time (she was very young) when she went out one night, with opera glasses, and stared hard at the cold full moon, trying to see the human beings who had landed there.

Up to the present it had been found impossible to travel to other planets, which were so much further away than the moon, owing to the enormous difficulties of fuel and provision capacity; but Engineer Lieben was always telling his daughter that, one day, he would find a fuel which would take him to Venus and back.

Fuel, fuel! Ilse Lieben was sick of the subject.

“Aren't you content with the moon?” she demanded.
“Isn't that far enough?”

"No, no," her father would reply, "nothing is far enough."

He had spent half his life in the fuel laboratories at Munich ; for a whole year he had been working on an improved external-combustion engine of his own design, but it was not yet fit for application. But one day he would finish it, and then he would make a fortune.

Ilse sighed. She would very much like to possess a fortune. Was she to be a secretary all her life ? She felt that she had typed out every corner of her employer's mind, and there could not possibly be anything left in it. The Gräfin was certainly a voluminous writer ; and a peculiar worker. When she dictated she was always fingering the beautiful string of pearls round her neck—one of the famous necklaces of the world.

What a lot Ilse could do with all the marks that necklace had cost ! Would they have as much as all that, if her father made a fortune ?

"The harder he works, all day Sunday and every other day, the sooner we shall have money ; but if he works too hard, he will make himself ill, then we shall never have money."

Engineer Lieben was a hard worker, but he was getting old ; yet he had an ease of movement and firmness of skin which showed athletic health.

He found it very difficult to understand anyone who took no interest in fuel. It seemed to him that the whole principle of the universe was fuel. All transportation and power depended finally upon it. We were immersed in a matrix which we breathed and which burnt the fuel inside us. We ate fuel, in

effect, and often we drank it. All plants and animals consumed air in slow burning. All around us were living flames—oxidisation was the key-note of existence.

That was what Ilse's father thought, and he had a dream of one day discovering the perfect fuel, which would yield unlimited power per kilogram. But he had not yet thought out what he would do with it if he got it.

Fräulein Lieben's attention was attracted by a roaring overhead ; she looked out of the window of the passenger-car, and saw with longing eyes a large soaring machine flying over them. Rockets symbolised freedom to her ; people with money could walk into a soaring machine at any time they wished, and blow themselves off the face of the globe, right out of the trivial world, into places where there were new and exciting sensations.

She peered up at the huge mass driving across the sky ; below the row of windows in the metal hull, red words shone on a grey background :

MUNCHEN-BOMBAY FXW2

In a moment the "soarer" drove sharply into a feathery cloud and was lost.

Ilse let her gaze drop, and in doing so she noticed the newspaper of the passenger sitting in front of her. There was a large photograph which drew her attention with the irresistible attraction which other people's newspapers possess. It showed the head and shoulders of a plain-looking Parisian of twenty-two, Grindin by name.

Though plain-looking, in person he was vivid and

striking, one of those people who make everyone turn round and look at them when they pass.

Ilse looked closely at the photograph, then leaned forward over the shoulder of the man who was holding the paper, in order to read the caption under the photograph :

“ Monsieur Paul Grindin, the Parisian geologist, who has been enjoying a vacation in Switzerland, is reported to be leaving Europe to-day for India.”

“ I wonder if he was in the soarer,” the girl thought, listening to the distant roar of the machine echoing from the clouds.

She glanced at the page of the Bible resting on her knee : “ *And a new star had risen.*” A few pages fluttered over : “ *And he looked up and he saw fire and death dropping from the sky.*”

When Ilse had finished with her Bible class, which passed off more pleasantly than she had expected, she returned home as quickly as she could so as to make tea for her father, who might be expected at any moment. She unlocked the front door with her key, for the maid was away on a trip to Hohenlinden.

The house was an old one in the Kaiserplatz, so old that the front of it was entirely covered with deeply ingrained dirt. It had been built before 1940, and it showed all the signs of the artificial old-fashioned architecture of the fourth decade. Somewhere about 1950, two rooms in the front had been knocked into one, to form a very roomy lounge. This was twenty years before the Liebens had rented it, partly furnished.

There were three sofas in the lounge, and numerous gilded chairs, built to withstand generations of sitters. There was an old upright piano in one corner, whose strings had been stretched so many times that it was a fine tribute to the tensibility of copper.

In another corner, on a small table, stood a heavy paper-weight, made of bronze and moulded to represent a soaring machine in flight, with exaggerated rocket-tubes sticking out at the back, and curling bronze flames coming out of the tubes.

In a third corner, on a shelf, was a domed glass case, containing a very ordinary-looking piece of yellow rock, which had been brought all the way from the Sea of Serenity on the moon. The fourth corner was empty, and always draughty, because of a crack between the bricks which let the wind through.

There were two fireplaces in the double room, and two mantels. One of the fireplaces had been papered over, but it was still obviously there. Hanging above one of the mantels was a mirror, while over the other was a large coloured sketch of a lunar landscape—a jagged fantastic outline of wild crags, the eastern slopes of the Crater of Copernicus.

The room was invisibly lighted at night by narrow electric gas-tubes, hidden in the cornice, and running right round the room. The year-old wallpaper, in the polychromatic fashion of the tenth decade, designed to startle and stimulate, rather than harmonise, was entirely black on one wall, green on another, yellow circles with a red background on the third, and purple triangles with a white background on the fourth. There were no carpets, and, since those comfortable

collectors and concealers of dirt had become unpopular in the fifth decade, the floor was strewn with small octagonal rubber mats. In the middle of the floor, with chairs and sofas arranged around it, was a circular depression—a sunken copper vessel or basin, where cigarette ends and other litter could be thrown.

Below the mirror, partly hiding the mark on the wallpaper made by the concealed fireplace, was a small silver harp, with one string missing.

When Ilse came in, she opened the door of the lounge, and threw the Sunday paper on to one of the sofas. Her father usually went into the lounge after Sunday tea, and liked to be the first to read the paper, while it was still unhandled and neat.

Stepping across the passage-way, she glanced into her father's study, to see if anything needed tidying.

This room was less than half the size of the lounge ; its floor had no rubber mats ; it was not lighted by gas-tubes, but in a striking and original manner—by the old-fashioned electric globe. There was a hard angular chair, with gilded legs, drawn up to Otto Lieben's desk. He could never work in an easy-chair, he said ; it was too comfortable, and he could not keep himself awake. But he allowed himself a thin cushion on his chair, to save his trousers. The Liebens had always been careful of expenses, even now, when their income kept them in comfort, though not in luxury.

The cushion had slipped off the chair, so Ilse put it back. Then she dusted the desk with her handkerchief, and smiled as she saw the old ragged logarithmic tables lying beside the slide-rule. Her father refused to get a new set of tables, though the back was off

the binding, and the page corners were all turned down and torn.

On the desk, there was a copy of *The Weekly Rocketeer*, of the day before. It was a trade magazine, cost one and a half marks, and was full of advertisements for soarers, metal hulls, rocket-tubes, external-combustion engines, fuel mixtures, and so on. On the back was a coloured picture of a soarer breaking out of a cloud, and underneath it :

SCHWEINER & SCHWEINER, AUGSBURG, BAVARIA

Second-hand Soaring Machines. Perfect
Condition. Certificate of Airworthiness.
From 20,000 Marks. Machines Bought.

At the side of the desk was a low-cushioned chair, bearing a pile of reference books. Ilse picked them up and impatiently put them on a shelf, fastened to the wall above the desk.

"I wish he would try to keep things in order," she muttered with a frown.

As she turned to leave the room, she caught sight of a white laboratory jacket hanging behind the door. The ends of the sleeves, and the outsides of the pockets, were thickly covered with dirt, and there was a yellow-edged acid-hole in the back.

"I must put that among the other things, or I'm sure to forget it for the laundry to-morrow morning."

She jerked it off the hook, and pulled the detachable buttons from it, slipping them into her pocket.

Turning, she gave the desk another flick, then ran out into the hallway. She found time to look closely at her face in the hall-mirror. She felt as tired as she looked ; she had been fatigued the day before, for

the Gräfin von Freiburg had dictated to her for three hours that Saturday morning without a stop. The material she had had to plough through, on her electric typer, was so ponderous that it had exhausted her. That same night she had recklessly spent two days' salary for a seat in the Munich Festival Theatre, and the thought of that extravagance re-exhausted her nearly as much as the typing had originally done.

She hurried into the kitchen, flinging the jacket on a pile of laundry, and began to prepare the tea.

The water was just on the boil when she heard the front door open, and Herr Lieben come in. There was a characteristic sharp hollow sound from the hallway, and Ilse knew it was her father by this noise. Invariably he banged the glass of the barometer with his knuckles several times, as if doing his best to make it point to "fair." After a last enthusiastic bang, he came down the passage and entered the dining-room, which was next to the kitchen at the back of the house.

Ilse followed with a tray, and set the table for tea.

"*Guten abends*, Ilschen."

"Good evening, father."

The engineer always spoke in a slow and regular voice, making a pause at nearly every consonant. He was not very old, and his pale blue eyes had a healthy look about them. He had shaved off his beard two years ago. He was a level-headed man, but his thoughts were not elastic ; he was prejudiced on many subjects.

"Well, Ilschen," he said, as she was pouring out the tea, "how did you get on with your Bible class?"

"Oh," she laughed, "not so bad. I think the pupils taught me more than I taught them."

Lieben frowned. He did not like levity in such matters. He had hardly read a chapter of the Bible himself, but he always pretended he was familiar with it.

"By the way," he added, "have you asked the Gräfin for a rise yet?"

"No, not yet," replied Ilse, and blushed faintly. She had been going to ask for a rise for several months now, but she had not been able to summon up the moral courage.

In order to change the conversation, she went on quickly.

"Isn't it time you stopped working on a Sunday, father? Here you are, tiring yourself out every weekend, when you should be taking things easily, and walking with me in the park!"

"What," cried her father, looking up, "haven't you got any young men to take you out?"

"Yes, plenty." She sighed wearily, for he always evaded.

"Well, then," he said, and bit a piece of cake. "Just a little more, Ilschen, of this hard work. Another month should do it, at the most, then I shall have it!"

"What?" asked Ilse sharply. She knew perfectly well what he was talking about, but a young girl who spoke three or four languages fluently had a right to be precise, now and then, in the matter of precision in speech.

"Improved fuel, of course," retorted her father briefly, for he was annoyed.

Ilse sat down and commenced tea.

"Can you guess what one of the pupils in the Sunday School asked me to-day? He is just a little fellow of six, with a mop of red hair, and when I was getting ready to leave, he came up to me quite seriously, and whispered: 'Miss Lieben, do you think they'll ever make soaring machines big enough to take us to Heaven?' What do you think of that?"

"Ha! What did you say?"

"Well, for the moment I couldn't think of anything at all. At last I said: 'No, they will never get as far as that.' 'Why not?' he persisted. 'Oh, the fuel isn't good enough,' I answered, and he went away with a puzzled look on his face!"

"Not a bad answer that!"

After tea, Herr Lieben walked towards the lounge in order to read his paper, but his daughter ran after him and pulled him back.

"Do you know what you'll do if you go in there, father?" she asked banteringly. "You'll read the news for half an hour, then it will be too dark to go out. You'll go into your study and work till midnight, and make yourself ill! Now, isn't that right? Come and have a walk before it gets too dark."

"Ordered about by my own daughter!" grumbled Lieben. Then their faces relaxed and they laughed at each other.

"All right, I suppose a bit of fresh air won't do me any harm. But not more than twenty minutes, mind you!"

In high spirits, Ilse pushed a hat on his head and led him through the front door.

They sauntered between the formal flower-borders of the park, in the chilly sunset light.

"Do you know, father, this is the very first time you've walked out on a Sunday since that night two years ago, when mother died."

"So it is, so it is!"

Frau Lieben had been drowned accidentally in the Danube.

Ilse glanced sideways at her father and wondered how he would take it if she asked him to give up work, and rest for a whole week or more. It struck her that he would worry far more and make himself really ill through impatience. She decided she had better not suggest any such thing as a holiday, at least for another few weeks.

They turned a corner by a shrubbery, and came to a large open space with a bandstand, where a brass band was playing rather loudly, and in a bouncing manner, the familiar hymn-tune by Leo Cheovrensky :

*Men of space ! Men of space !
God save those who fly through space
Beyond the Moon !
God save those who brave the Depths,
May they come back soon !*

*Let the men who in their chrome-steel vessels ride, the starry
night rending,
Come at last to haven safe and attain a happy landing !
In Thy Peace and Wisdom may they lie
Who seek Thy Wonders in the sky !*

"Let's get out of here, I don't like noise," said the engineer, turning round. "Except explosions," he added, rather grimly.

They returned to the house, and Herr Lieben sat on the sofa in the lounge, reading his paper. His daughter was looking over his shoulder, and caught

sight of that photograph she had already seen a few hours previously in the electric passenger-car.

"Didn't you meet him once in Paris, father?" she asked, pointing at the photograph.

"Who's that? Grindin? Never heard of him before."

"Why, I remember you telling me that you had met him at an International Convention in Paris—you know, the one last autumn."

"Paul Grindin? Oh, yes. I recollect now. Middle of October, raining cats and dogs; tons of boring speeches—only one sensible speech, about fuel. Grindin gave an address on geology, but I didn't take any of it in."

"Is he anything like his photograph?"

"Nowhere near it. He looks better than that, I should hope. It's a very bad picture."

Ilse was surprised, and did not speak. To her, the photograph seemed attractive.

"Yes, he's more or less good-looking, but he plasters his hair with oil. All the time I was talking to him, when I met him after the speeches were finished, drops of oil were trickling down his face from his hair. Can't understand the fellow—dressed to a vulgar degree of perfection, invariably clicking his heels together, and bowing stiffly every time he shook hands. I thought that that had passed out years ago. Also, he's a barbarian—hardly speaks a word of German! Talks high-class Parisian, quickly, and a bit nervously."

"When the convention was over," continued Otto Lieben, "some of us went to a *café*, and got absolutely soaked in the rain, merely while stepping into a cab :

quite a number of us—Lorraine, high-explosives, a fine chap; Devine and Lecocq, ferro-chemists; Chortle, an Englishman, in petroleum, I think; and Gabbi, specialist in asbestos insulation. Our interests were all more or less connected, you see, and I can't imagine how Grindin joined us. He's geology, you know—oh, yes, he was a friend of Chortle; that's how he came in. Hadn't a hat, for some reason, and the rain made a mess of his hair. When we went into the *café*, the water and oil made a queer mixture on his forehead. He took quite an intelligent interest in fuel and soarers, so I suppose he must have been human. Wasn't greatly struck by him, however. The paper says he's going to India."

"Yes. Did you see the Bombay soarer pass over the town this afternoon? It was nearly half an hour late."

"No, I didn't see it, too busy. But I heard it all right—awful row! It was flying below the regulation height, I'm sure."

"Would Monsieur Grindin be in it, do you think?"

"Very likely, wouldn't be surprised."

.

Grindin was sitting alone on a front seat in the soarer, looking calmly out of the window. He was not thinking of geology or the Swiss glaciers, but of the terrible distance the hard earth was below him, and how undignified this fashionable method of travel was.

He picked up a paper and began reading it, but he saw an account of a soarer accident, so put the paper down. Paul Grindin was a nervous man. He

described it to himself as "an affliction of the nerves," a kind expression. But he did not allow his nervousness to become evident to other people ; always he was calm, without emotion, judging by his face.

The soarer was crowded with passengers ; there was hardly a vacant seat, and the luggage-racks were overflowing.

Paul Grindin looked down the soarer to see if there was anyone there he knew. In the seat just behind him, a big man and a small man were sitting together. The big man's face seemed familiar ; he did not remember it, but he had seen it numbers of times in journals and magazines. The small man had a good-looking face, and by his nimble motions he seemed to be alert. They were talking in tones so low that Grindin could not hear, although the detonations of the exploding gases outside could not pierce through the sound-proof walls.

The big man was Henry Guidance, of the Bombay Institute of Technology ; he was known as the most courageous financier of the latter half of the twentieth century.

He appeared especially big beside his small companion. His face was amazingly wide, and this gave him a look of great resolution and wisdom ; nor was his jaw less powerful than his cheek-bones.

He had been born in India, and had spent all his early life there ; from the moment the first successful aeroplane driven by reaction left the ground, he had shown an increasing interest in soaring machines. Most people had heard of Guidance—when the first soarers flew to the moon, he had supplied money and plans for the building of Soaring Rocket No. 1.

Eagerly he had waited till it was finished, and he had proudly watched its departure on its first trial flight. It came back safe and sound, and was at once put into commercial operation. It then leapt from the ground, with a useful load of many tons, but half an hour later it fell from a height of thirty miles, and burst into flames off the coast of Portugal ; all the crew perished, drowned or burnt.

With admirable persistence, Guidance at once commenced his Soaring Rocket No. II, and Soaring Rocket No. III. As soon as No. II left the workshops, she started her career, and completed four successful flights to the moon. On taking off for the fifth flight, however, she blew to smithereens as she left the ground.

This disaster cost Guidance so much money that he was compelled to postpone the completion of No. III ; he felt it keenly, because there were only minor fittings to finish.

He was waiting impatiently till he could gather together more resources, while his machine lay idle in a great iron hangar on the left bank of the Rhine.

Mr. Guidance's friend, who was sitting next to him in the München-Bombay soarer, was Gystak. Formerly he had been an aeroplane pilot, in fact, he was the man who had taken the No. II on her first two flights to the moon ; but after she had blown herself up, he had lost his nerve, and had taken to journalism. Just now he was working on the staff of a Stüttgart newspaper.

He was explaining to Mr. Guidance, in his clear, sharp voice, that he was going to be dropped at Baghdad, in order to travel to the canal zone at Port

Said, whence he would contribute a series of articles to his paper.

When Gystak had finished, Guidance stood up to take a newspaper from the rack above, but he fumbled and the paper fell on the head of Paul Grindin on the seat in front. Grindin started nervously, but in a moment he had dived again behind his rampart of coolness, and picked up the paper for Guidance.

Very soon they were deep in conversation, and Monsieur Grindin told Guidance all about his excursions into geology, while Mr. Guidance informed Grindin of his exploits in Soaring Machine finance. Mr. Gystak was backward with people he did not know well, unless he was seeking news, so he did not join in the conversation a great deal.

A lady came walking up the passage-way between the seats, carrying a bird-cage in her hand, containing a small bird. She set it down near the outlet of a ventilation pipe, so that the bird could get some air, and the pipe happened to be just in front of Grindin's seat.

Mr. Guidance's face went strangely stiff, and he hid himself behind his newspaper. After a few moments he rose and turned to Gystak and Grindin.

"Come on, shall we sit at the back for a change?"

Without waiting for an answer, he led the way to the back of the soarer, and the other two followed him, greatly surprised.

For what reason should Henry Guidance turn pale and shudder at the sight of a bird-cage?

It was rumoured that, when he was twelve years old, he was climbing with an older friend in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, when a large and fierce

bird attacked his friend. The man was supposed to have died later from his injuries, but Guidance would never repeat the story. Ever since then, so rumour said, the financier had had a hopeless fear of birds, of any size—a feeling of horror which he found impossible to overcome.

His companions were too polite to ask what was wrong, and he did not offer to explain ; naturally he was ashamed of his *idée fixe*. The Parisian sat silent, wondering, but not speaking, while Gystak, who had known such a thing to happen before, racked his brains to discover a topic of conversation, so as to put an end to this incident.

There was an awkward silence, then the journalist spoke abruptly.

“What do you think of this fellow, Jonathan Gorstein—the robber, I mean? I see he has got away with someone’s jewels—this time, at the Bayreuth Orpenhaus. The *Stuttgart Tageblatt*—that’s my paper, you know—has a front page column on it.”

The Frenchman responded brightly.

“One day he’ll get a little too bold, that Gorstein fellow, then he’ll get nabbed.”

After that, there was nothing more to be said ; Guidance did not speak, but sat wrapped in gloomy silence.

Then happily an idea struck Mr. Gystak, something which he knew would be a catching topic :

“What d’you think of the new star ; Arion, the one spotted three weeks ago ? ”

CHAPTER II

THE BLUE PLANET

NEVER before, in the history of the world, had so many people been convinced that the Day of Judgement had arrived at last. Waves of unprecedented emotion swept through all nations and sects, and civilisation came near to extinction. The suicide-rate increased a thousand times ; men and women flung themselves from windows and cliff-tops, under trains and omnibuses, strangled themselves, gassed, poisoned, shot themselves, stabbed, hanged, drowned.

Disorganisation and immorality were universal, and excesses of all kinds were freely practised.

Every kind of crank raised his voice and shouted unheeded. Mass prayers took place in the public streets. Pilgrimages were started, but many of the pilgrims disbanded before their destination was reached, in order to loot, or destroy themselves. In America, on the average, five new creeds were founded every day, to swell the ranks of the fanatics among the Latter-day Saints, the Theosophists, the Spiritualists, the Christian Scientists, and the rest.

Although this was the last decade of the twentieth century, not all the wonderful advancements in scientific thought could allay the fear of universal cataclysm.

The beginning of these frightful conditions was a singular but quite unspectacular occurrence in the sky on March 14th, 1992.

A Czechoslovakian amateur astronomer was observing the midnight sky through a cheap low-powered telescope, when he noticed the sudden eclipse of a star of the fourth magnitude near the constellation of Orion.

With instant presence of mind, he glanced at his wrist-watch, and kept his telescope pointed towards the vanished star. The star reappeared ten and a half minutes later. Looking up records, he could see no mention of such an eclipse at that time, so he telephoned his observations to Prague University the next day.

More expert object-glasses confirmed the existence of a dark body of unknown dimensions, which was crossing the heavens in a westerly direction.

The following night was perfectly clear, and as the sunset-line passed round the globe, telescopes and field-glasses everywhere swung to a certain locality in the heavens, as if directed by a magnet. Tokyo Observatory was the first to call attention to a faint crescent of light hanging in the sky.

Astronomers watched the new planet with great curiosity, not to say amazement. Day by day it waxed, until the full disc was displayed, about half the width of Mars. It was established beyond doubt that this was no comet; it was pursuing a closed conic round the sun. Why had it never been seen before—where had it come from?

There was a singular air of mystery attached to this

wanderer of the heavens, which drew excited attention from the Press.

Then the remarkable controversy arose as to who had the right to name it.

A newspaper brought forward proof that three hours before Hesker had telephoned Prague, a youth living in Rügenwalde on the Baltic had reported the same phenomenon. "Therefore," said the newspaper, "we suggest that the planet should be named *New Pomerania*."

Immediately messages came from all over the world, claiming priority in the discovery. An astronomer in Oslo was one of the first.

"The name must be Christiania," said Norway.

"No, no," protested Milwaukee, "Wisconsinia!"

A professor of Manchester University put forward *Georgia*, in honour of King George the Seventh. A Roumanian demanded *Buchar*; a Slav *Belgradia*; while the indignant Hesker, from the suburbs of Königgrat, vainly suggested *Titanus*, in honour of King Titan the Second.

Incidentally, at a congress held on April 2nd, all these were discarded in favour of *Arion*, and the ancient Greek bard became immortalised in the heavens—for no particular reason, except that celestial convention demanded classical titles.

But by April 4th, when these undignified discussions were just closing (and Guidance, Grindin, and Gystak were soaring to India), indeed from the moment the new planet swam into human perception, soberer astronomers were calculating its elements—its mass, diameter, specific gravity, major axis, and ellipticity of orbit.

The first person to make a horrible discovery was a professor of Durham University, on April 6th. He sat down at once and began his calculations all over again. Finding only a minor mistake, which barely affected the result, he repeated them a third time. Then he sat for a long time, staring at the scribbled figures. He went to the mirror and looked at his calm pale face, while gripping the mantelpiece with hands which had lost their strength. Finally he took his papers to a colleague, as a check ; neither of them slept that night.

The news that reached the public next day was very vague and conflicting. Some newspapers spoke of it in a light-hearted manner, as if it were a joke or an obvious hoax. The people of Glasgow were puzzled by large posters announcing : END OF WORLD ! while the *Manchester Post* proclaimed : DURHAM PROFESSOR'S PAINFUL LAPSE ! and the *Yorkshire News* had : UNDIGNIFIED LEVITY IN UNIVERSITY.

For the most part, people took no notice whatever, and for five days an attempt was made to erase the affair altogether. Then, on the sixth day, came the most remarkable broadcast the B.B.C. had ever given.

It expressed the results of hundreds of calculations, repetitions by numerous people of the work of the Durham professor.

The Astronomer-Royal, sitting grim-faced in the Observatory at Greenwich, looked down at the green bank of the Thames, and spoke to the Empire for twenty-five minutes.

An innkeeper in Shrewsbury was drinking port, and listening to his wireless set :

"According to the irrefutable laws of celestial

mechanics, the fact is definitely established that, on the evening of the forty-seventh day from to-day, with a possible error of four thousand miles either way, the planet Arion and the earth will coincide in space."

"What does 'e mean?" demanded a customer.

The innkeeper pointed his glass towards the loud-speaker and laughed.

"'E means a 'ead-on collision," he said, and slapped his hands together.

"Do you realise what this means, ladies and gentlemen? It is very necessary that you should realise exactly what this means. . . . In seven weeks time, every living creature on the globe will suffer immediate annihilation. The heat produced will be enough to boil sixty billion billion pans of water. In an instant, nothing will remain of the two planets but a vast cloud of tenuous gas, while you and I, and all humanity, will be floating in that cloud."

The innkeeper did not finish his glass of port.

Even then it was several days before the world became convinced of its imminent destruction; indeed, full realisation only came on the day when Arion grew visible to the naked eye. Distributors of cheap telescopes and field-glasses made unprecedented sales, and the prices of lenses soared. Every night, millions of people turned out of doors to catch a glimpse of Arion, and strained their necks and their eyes. People had always regarded the heavens as harmless, so this intrusion from the pretty twinkling depths of space seemed incredible.

Soon the apparent angular diameter of Arion began to grow perceptibly.

It was about this time that the first signs of the fall of civilisation commenced.

Universal extinction ! All life was to come to a sudden stop, leaving nothing ! The fingers of the Creator were to write *The End*, close the book with a snap, and fling it into the wastepaper basket.

The people who prepared the posters and banners for the Salvation Army set to work with eager zeal. All trades, except Optical Instruments, began to decline ; the followers of Spinoza enjoyed an astonishing prosperity. The roar of traffic in the cities was replaced by the rattle and blare of brass bands, by the loud singing of pious hymns, and the chanting of prayers, all desperately trying to attract the attention of God.

The *Christian Science Journal* said with heartening optimism, " All we need to do is to Think Right, and this creation of the astronomical Mind will automatically recede, back to its native nothingness. Can a telescope envisage Substance ? Can matter destroy Mind ? Can Fear prevail against Love ? Can mortal science contradict Divine Science ? As Mrs. Eddy says," etc., for seven columns.

But every day Arion grew bigger.

The more fatalistic scientists found plenty to occupy their attention during the last seven weeks of the earth's career.

The new planet was describing a definite ellipse, like any other planet, and countless times previously it must have been " in conjunction " with the earth. It was inconceivable that such a large body, so near at hand, had entirely escaped attention till now. More-

over, its presence could have been calculated by its perturbing effects on other planets, unless Einstein's mechanics was no nearer an approximation to reality than Newton's.

It looked as though this new world had presented a startling mystery, and then was committing the incivility of destroying men, before they had time to solve the mystery. The scientists set to work impatiently, for they knew that they had only seven weeks.

They recorded all the known facts about the planet as accurately as possible.

What was the length of the major axis of its orbit? About a hundred and twenty million miles.

What was its ellipticity? It was very eccentric, more so than Mercury.

Its weight? It turned the scales at three-quarter earth weight.

Diameter? Seven and a half thousand miles.

Its year was a little longer than that of the earth, its colour was distinctly blue, even to the unaided eye, but reports as to the length of its day were unreliable; there were no landmarks on the surface. No one had as yet seen any satellites. Spectroscopy indicated the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere.

All this information had been obtained in the first two weeks, so advanced was the astronomy of the last decade of the twentieth century.

Appeals were made to the European Bureau for Interplanetary Communication—could they not offer some hope of escape from the approaching cataclysm?

The headquarters of the Bureau was the great

Tempelhof Aerodrome at Berlin, where thousands of telegrams were received daily, bearing suggestions and appeals.

Could they not build a monstrous fleet of soaring machines, and transport the entire population of the globe to another planet, before the day of the disaster?

Impossible! The record flight by a soaring machine was a mere six hundred thousand miles, and then the crew had succumbed to starvation.

Why not transfer mankind to the moon, and construct shelters beneath its lifeless surface?

It would be an impossible task to manufacture air indefinitely for millions of people; besides, how could they turn out so many machines in a few weeks? In any case, it would be useless, for the moon must be involved in the collision, if indeed the whole solar system was not gravely affected.

What then were the uses of astronomers, or any other scientists, for that matter? They plunged humanity into despair, then, with all their boasted learning, their complacent well-fed professors in dignified gowns, their expensive Universities, which made undergraduates feel superior to the common herd, they could offer no help or hope of any description!

There came a time during those seven weeks when a movement was begun to assassinate all scientists; it was shown that they had always been dangerous parasites in society; it was demonstrated that they were responsible for unemployment, armaments, discontent, atheism, and a thousand other evils; but soon all this was forgotten, despite the logic of the

arguments. The end of the world was too near for humanity to think of other things ; all irrelevant thoughts were swept aside by the shadow of universal Death.

The dreadful day came when the placards announced

THREE MORE WEEKS !

Beggars, kings, thieves, policemen, murderers, judges, prostitutes, priests, Christians, Jews, Islamites, Brahmins, Agnostics, Spiritualists, and at last even Christian Scientists, listened to their trembling hearts, and whispered, *three more weeks !*

Everyone fell on their knees and prayed at the rising and setting of the blue planet—that is, all except the isolated explorers, who looked upon the new star with astonishment, for it was now half the width of the moon.

The famous volcano in Japan, said to claim a victim a day, now saw hundreds together jump from the crater's edge in a frenzy. Previously a man had been hired to keep the people from the edge of the crater, but now they had to put in his place several armed men. Then, one day, the guards themselves jumped over as well.

One-sixth of the world's population went insane.

Soon the blue planet outshone the moon, making the night odd with its peculiar radiance. One night, the watchers in London gasped and shivered with fear at its unbelievable size ; it rose slowly into the sky, a monstrous arc of blue, now more than twice the size of the moon. But the most incredible spectacle was the sight of its blue disc in full phase. It took the

breath away. It was so bright as to be just bearable to the eye. All who saw it thus became convinced from that moment that nothing whatever could prevent the collision. The frightful cold vision in the sky, blotting out thousands of stars, did more than all the astronomical calculations to convince men that here was their doom.

Disease and starvation arose through the dislocation of commerce and communications. The whole world experienced what Europe and Asia experienced in 1348, when the Black Death began, which slew forty million souls. The passionate religious revivals helped to make conditions worse. People stayed up at night to count the passing of their last hours. Many thousands tried to escape from the earth; they bought soaring machines, and blew themselves up or starved to death in space. One commercial enterprise advertised and sold "new improved machines," guaranteed to reach Mars or Venus. Undreamed-of profits were made by these fraudulent manufacturers, and not one of them was brought to justice. Law was a thing forgotten.

Meanwhile the astronomers were no nearer explaining why the blue planet had never been seen before. Indeed most of them had given up the attempt. However they might proclaim the impersonal detachment of the true scientist, the intense emotions of the time, shared by them, showed them to be ordinary human beings.

Two weeks more, whispered the crowds in the neglected streets, with aching eyes, whirling brains, and empty stomachs. *Two weeks more!* Look how Arion filled a quarter of the heavens . . . their faces were ghastly

in that blue light. Two weeks, fourteen days, three hundred hours. . . .

Inexorably the days dragged on.

One week more of life !

May 25th, 1992, was Judgement Day !

CHAPTER III

CHAOS

BY far the greater part of the population of the globe had given in to a most frightful horror and fear, the like of which had never before been conceived.

But an exceedingly small percentage retained an amount of calmness and dignity, continuing their ordinary labours to the last minute. Among these few were our friends of April 4th, Henry Guidance and Herr Lieben of Munich.

Guidance believed in a self-contained strength of soul, and was always striving to keep up to that belief.

As he saw the immense battering-ram of the planet Arion rushing towards the earth, preparing to break it into a million fragments, he declared firmly :

“ I will not be put out by this thing. Whatever happens, I will continue along the road of my destiny up to the ultimate second of mortal time, the very dawn of doomsday. I will go on with my business, just as if that thing were not there at all.”

He carried this out so effectively that he took advantage of the chaotic crisis in the world's finance, and brought off a deal which ordinary people would call shady. A large sum of money fell to his share, which, however, was not of much use, since trade was almost at a standstill.

While Guidance was gathering together a somewhat useless amount of wealth, Engineer Lieben was showing a similar spirit of defiance or indifference. This remarkable courage was due to the fact that, while revolutions were upsetting nations and insanity was killing millions, Herr Lieben had at last completed the discovery at which he had been working so hard for many years.

This filled him with such excitement that a trifle like the end of the world was simply excluded from his imagination. Yes, he had at last perfected a more effective fuel than had ever been made before, and he had also applied the fuel to a new external-combustion engine of his own design.

"Now," said his daughter bitterly, "we can have as much money as we need, but we can't buy anything with it! We are really wealthy at last, but we shall starve, because trade has stopped! Even if we could use the money which is rightfully ours, in a week's time this planet Arion, this clumsy monster from the skies, will put an end to us all!"

The coming disaster had another immediate effect on Fräulein Lieben; fright had dried up the literary output of the Gräfin von Freiburg, so her secretary had nothing whatever to do. Like thousands of others thrown out of employment, she had plenty of leisure in which to contemplate the approaching doom.

Engineer Lieben, as well as Guidance, displayed some business ingenuity, but his was of a more honest order. One day he gathered from the Press that Mr. Guidance had restored the loss to his resources due to the explosion of his Soaring Rocket No. II, and that Mr. Guidance was seriously considering completing

his third model, which was still lying idle in the Rhineland hangar.

The radio service from Munich to India had not yet broken down, and that same evening Henry Guidance received a radiogram :

Henry guidance bombay technical institute stop offer improved engine for soarer no 3 stop gives 60 per cent more acceleration stop otto lieben obergeringenieur munchen schwabing kaiserplatz 103 den 17 mai 1992

When Guidance received this, he felt a tremendous elation. Here was a gesture of enterprise at the very crack of doom ! Here was a kindred creature, who was capable of proceeding defiantly with ordinary business under the actual shadow of Arion ! He was so enthusiastic over this human magnificence that he wired back at once :

Will consider proposition stop await arrival at munich tomorrow guidance.

Gystak was too busy collecting news to have much time to think about the cosmic collision ; there was such an enormous amount of news, far more than any paper could print.

He had written one postcard to Guidance from Cairo :

Do you know they have tramways to the pyramids ! The great Pyramid at Ghizeh ! Actually had trams there since 1930 ! This is the last straw !

Then Gystak had been recalled to Bavaria, to cover the further exploits of Jonathan Gorstein, the jewel robber, who had been almost too bold, and had been nearly captured, but had fled to Czechoslovakia,

Tremendous, pitiable struggles of self-control took place in the soul of Paul Grindin, during the last fortnight of time. The vaster and more despicable his fear, the nobler was his restraint.

Unlike Guidance and Lieben, who continued their work as if nothing unusual were happening, the Frenchman lost all his interest in geology.

Thousands were giving up earthly affairs, and committing suicide into the bargain. Paul Grindin was far more scared of suicide than of the blue planet, so he dragged on a miserable existence, doing nothing, yet not daring to do anything to end it.

There were others who showed a calm exterior while the world went mad ; among them were Mr. Hergesheimer, the noted New Zealand astronomer, and his able and skilled assistant, Mr. Dickens.

Like most astronomers at that time, they were intensely interested in the facts about the blue intruder from the unknown.

The most noticeable feature physically about Hergesheimer was his size ; he was fat !

When he read in a newspaper about the remarkable new external-combustion engine Mr. Guidance was installing in his soarer, he muttered with a thoughtful light in his eyes :

“ Ah, now, if only one had the plans of this powerful new engine of Lieben’s, one could make quite a lot of money ! ”

His assistant, Mr. Dickens, looked extraordinarily young, and he was nearly as young as he looked. Like a large number of very clever people, he was inclined to be slightly unstable mentally ; his

temperament was artistic and excessively sensitive—he had an extremely bad temper.

He had a wife, but unhappily they did not get on well together. She was one of those modern creatures, to whom a large minimum income was an absolute necessity, if life was to be merely tolerable; she was luxury-loving, and an astronomer's assistant does not get a great deal of pay. For a long time she had pestered him for money he could not give, until gradually a genuine affection had turned to something rather different.

Even without this annoyance, Mr. Dickens inclined occasionally to a slight morbidity, which was actually much deeper than it appeared. But whenever this unpleasant mood came upon him, he was always aroused out of it by his wife, and put into a worse one. She delighted to take a petty revenge for her lack of luxuries, and waited specially for him to fall into this mood of wretchedness, before pouncing upon him with her arguments and naggings.

During this terror period, many mental institutions suffered from neglect. A number of the keepers, through fear, became madder than the inmates; some killed themselves, others were killed in riots, and there was no one who cared enough to see that their places were refilled. As a result, during the confusion and terror, many of the inmates escaped.

Among these was Dr. Nacht, a native of Brunswick. He had been a talented doctor, but suffered from attacks of madness which developed during the night-time, for the stars had a strange fascination for him.

It was daylight when he escaped, and he was sane.

But, at the time, the hellish blue monstrosity in the heavens was hanging directly overhead, as if with a symbolic significance. Nacht, free to roam through the chaotic countryside, looked up at Arion with wonder and awe. Here was a star that had come nearer to him than any star before.

Alfred Smith, a neurotic surgeon who lived at Shanklin in the Isle of Wight, was another who was morbidly fascinated by the new star. Perhaps there was a subtle psychical emanation from this brilliant body in the heavens. He grew more and more painfully excited as the day of collision approached.

His wife made no attempt to comfort him, because she was scared out of her wits. Smith was not frightened ; if he had felt fear, he might have been healthier in his mind. But as he stared up at the great orb dominating the sky, huge impulses tugged at his thoughts, and sometimes when he was alone he wept with emotion.

He was a materialist, and his creed was negation. He felt no fear of death, and this in itself was unnatural.

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Hesker, the Czechoslovakian astronomer who was the first to discover Arion, felt that he was bound to keep dignified to the last. It was his pet, his discovery ! It was not his part to feel anything else but pride for the blue planet, which had assumed such spectacular importance in the affairs of the world.

A new planet which he himself had found, and which was to destroy the world ! He made quite a stir in the Amateur Astronomers Society of Königsgrat, of which

he was a member. All the other members expressed their profound sympathy, and their extreme indignation that the new world had been named Arion, and not Titanus.

Every member of the Königgrat Astronomers Society signed a huge petition, caused other people to sign, sowed propaganda and printed leaflets, produced speeches and articles, in order to persuade the Czechoslovakian government to urge a serious and sustained protest against the name "Arion"! There were massed meetings, parades, shoutings, tub-thumpings, and even threats, unhappily, all in vain.

Hesker, the Czech, became famous in his own country. He was photographed, filmed, written about, and written to. Among his mail, there were a few discordant letters; one young lady wrote:

"Dear Sir, it was you who discovered this Arion, whatever it is, so it is up to you to deliver us from it. If anything happens, you will be responsible."

One of the first letters he had received was from a film company in Belgrade:

"What offer would you accept to take the leading male part in our new futurist film, *The Girl from Mars*? The first sequence is ready to be shot. Wilhelmina Toge will play opposite you."

To this, Hesker could not help replying:

"I regret to decline your offer, as there will unfortunately be no time to finish the film, since the end of the world takes place on May 25th."

There were also some pathetic postcards:

"I am a widow, with eleven growing children to keep. My husband shot himself because he believed you when you published that criminal rubbish about

the world coming to an end. What are you going to do about it?"

"Mr. Hesker, they've shut me up in this asylum, and it's really because of the things you've been saying in the papers, which made me go queer. But you'll come along and explain everything to them, won't you, then they'll let me out."

Meantime, while the Gräfin von Freiburg was nervously fingering her useless but brilliant necklace, and her secretary, Ilse Lieben, was weeping because her father would have money now, but they would be dead before they could spend it, and Jonathan Gorstein was reaping a burglarious harvest, because the police were no longer of any use—Henry Guidance was rushing north-west in the Bombay-München soarer, to keep his appointment with Herr Otto Lieben at Munich.

His anticipations concerning Lieben's new fuel and engine were disturbed by the marvellous sight of Arion sinking in the west. However slight, there was an inward turmoil and trembling in his mind. One week was such a short time!

His thoughts assumed an even graver aspect when he recalled the second reason for this hurried visit to Europe. Just a half-hour or so after he had despatched the telegram to the engineer, telling him he was leaving India, his 'phone bell had rung, and the Indian girl operator at the exchange had spoken to him.

He was in his room at the Institute of Technology, seated at his desk. It was the middle of the day, and he was very hot and uncomfortable, because something had gone wrong with the cooling plant.

The operator had said : " Long distance call from Bath, England, *per* wireless telephone. Hold the line."

Bath ! He pushed back his chair and stood up, tense with anxiety, putting his head unnecessarily near the microphone.

He had only one near relation in the whole world, so far as he knew, and he lived in Bath. This was his cousin, Tim Guidance, a boy of twelve, a rather precocious little man, with fiercely curling hair, dark blue eyes, and a pale attractive face.

Tim depended upon Henry Guidance for support. He was being kept at a school in the outskirts of Bath, and he slept and lived entirely in the school. Had something happened to him, and was the head of the school about to announce the news ?

Guidance wiped his forehead and moved impatiently. There was a confused murmur of cross-talk from the speaker. The last time he had seen Tim was no less than eight months ago. Then he had been in good health, though not particularly robust. Since then Guidance had not returned to England, but he had written and received replies, usually once a week, sometimes once a fortnight.

Although he felt no deep affection for Tim, he would hate to have anything happen to him while he was in a position of responsibility.

There came a click, a low cough, and a voice.

" Is that you, Dr. Topley ? " said Guidance.

" No, no. Tim."

" Tim ! What are you doing ? What has happened ? "

" Why, Uncle Henry, I wanted to call you up, so I came to the post office, and gave them your address."

"What, all by yourself. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, but everyone in the school has been telling me that soon every person in the world is going to be killed. Even the teachers have been saying that. It's not really true, is it, Uncle Henry? There's been some fighting in the town, and half the shops are shut up, and we aren't getting any more lessons. We shall have to go on rations. Can you hear me all right?"

"Yes, yes."

"No trains are running on the railway, Uncle, except once or twice a day, sometimes. Oh, and the head's gone away—he got hurt in a fight. Somebody threw bricks at the school yesterday, and broke two windows."

"Now, don't you worry, Tim. Don't believe a word that people tell you. Nothing's going to happen, believe me. Are you keeping all right?"

"Oh, yes, except I feel hungry."

"Look here, Tim, I'll tell you what—I'm leaving India to-day, and I'm coming to Europe."

"Will you come and see me?"

"Yes, certainly I will. I'll be at Bath before the end of the week."

"Oh, that's fine, Uncle. Oh—Timothy's got kittens."

"Timothy?"

"That's what I called that cat you gave me. Three kittens!"

"Well, that's splendid. Now you mustn't worry..."

Henry Guidance wanted to reassure Tim, but he did not see how he was to do it. He knew the world was finished.

The Munich soarer banked steeply, and the financier saw the Arabian Sea far below, rolling and glittering in a light which no other sea had reflected in the whole history of the world.

Again he looked along the dazzling track of the setting planet. His anxiety for Tim, for someone outside himself, made him realise, as he had not done before, just how utter and final the coming holocaust was going to be.

He stared at the blue ball through the veil of horizon haze. That was the thing which made men weep, go mad, jump over cliffs.

He pulled himself together, and his eyes grew hard and sharp.

He grasped his left wrist firmly and grimly in his right hand, and continued to gaze out of the window, while the flat coastline of Persia came into sight to the north. Courage! He, if no one else, must present a bold front to the Terror, right up to the very Crack o' Doom itself! A line of Emily Brontë flashed through his mind and steadied him: *No coward soul is mine, no trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere.* . . . But in spite of his prodigious will, Guidance had drawn perilously near to fear in that minute. . . .

By the time the soaring machine reached the end of the Persian Gulf and was heading for Damascus, he had full control over himself. Night was falling upon Damascus, as they sailed serenely through the Syrian sky. Several large fires could be seen, flickering and puffing up masses of smoke, the results of disorder and madness.

Guidance leant back and dozed lightly.

Over the Dardanelles the rockets were cut out, and

the machine glided for a kilometre or so in order to get below the base of a cloud-bank.

He was awakened by the sound of distant thuds and whines. He looked closely through the window, shielding his eyes from the interior lighting. He could make out some large ships off Constantinople, apparently fighting—could see the flashes of the guns as they kicked out their eighty-ton shells. They were not so much shells as miniature soaring machines, full of high explosive. He could see and hear them bursting, as they spread ton-fragments of iron over a square mile.

“What’s up?” he asked a neighbour.

“Oh, I expect it’s the Turkish mutineers. Half the Turkish navy’s gone out.”

He spent the night at the Rocket Gasthaus, Munich, and in the morning took a cab to 103 Kaiserplatz.

“Is this the place?” he asked the cabman as he stepped out, looking up at the dark old house rather doubtfully. “All right, don’t wait.”

He had seen a face at one of the windows, so someone was in. The door was opened before he could ring.

“Step right in, Mr. Guidance,” said the simple-faced Bavarian maid. Guidance was well known by his photographs in *The Weekly Rocketeer* and elsewhere.

He stepped into the lounge, and two people stood up to greet him. He saw before him an old man with a fresh face, a thin nose, and slightly greying hair at the sides of his head, dressed in a loose green coat, slashed so as to show the purple shirt beneath, long tight-fitting yellow stockings, and sandals. The young girl was probably twenty, dressed in a full-length white robe, white sleeves and white gloves, her hair

concealed by a broad-brimmed flapping hat. She had a rather prominent chin, the same nose exactly as the man, ears like those of a doll, and bold but restrained eyes.

The old man stepped forward and took Guidance's hand.

"May the sun never stop shining," he said, using the conventional greeting of rocketeers, and those associated with them. "I am Otto Lieben, and this is my——"

Ilse stepped forward and took his hand in turn.

"*Guten Tag*," she said. "I am his daughter, Ilse Lieben."

Her father turned and frowned.

"Oh, what's the use of etiquette," she exclaimed, with a show of weariness, "when in a few days we shall—all be gone!"

This was hardly tactful. They knew that things were already finished and done with, for practical purposes, that they might as well consider themselves straightaway as discarnate souls floating in a soundless ether, and that it probably did not matter in the least what anyone did. But she did not realise that these two men had a firm belief in the value and purpose of human dignity, and that they meant to uphold it, and would not be diverted by the prospect of mere material extinction.

What on earth did she think Guidance had come all the way from India for, and her father had sent an expensive radiogram to Bombay? What did she think was the reason for this interview, for which they had dressed and prepared themselves with unusual care?

Although she could speak and write several languages, and could wrestle and box and fence with skill and

ingenuity, she was not yet subtle enough to appreciate such demonstrations.

Henry Guidance sat down on the nearest sofa and spoke tactfully and loudly.

"Well, Herr Lieben, I had a very comfortable flight last night from Bombay. We were not disturbed by a single air-pocket."

The others sat down also, the father feeling slightly confused, the daughter still cool.

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Guidance. They say it is usually rough over Persia at seven thousand metres."

Lieben blushed faintly as he thought of his daughter's rudeness.

"But the rocket was twenty minutes late—such service!" added Guidance sarcastically.

Owing to Lieben's confusion, he hinted delicately that this was possibly due to the world panic, which had dislocated so many public services. Immediately he realised that he had referred to the forbidden subject of the coming doom, and there was an awkward silence.

Ilse did not understand this awkwardness and stiffness.

"He's a bit old fashioned," she was thinking to herself, "calling a soarer a rocket! They used to call it that, way back in the seventies, and I used to hear mother say it, but nowadays! Still, a man who is going to give us a whole lot of money for father's fuel is entitled to be as old-fashioned as he pleases! But what earthly use it is going to be, I can't imagine, when all the fuel and all the soarers and all the men and women are going to be smashed into little bits when Arion drops in on us! Still, he's quite a nice man, but too solemn."

"How soon can I see the results of your fuel tests, Mr. Lieben?" asked Guidance, breaking the silence.

"Oh, as soon as you like, Mr. Guidance. We will go straight away, and I will show you the fuel laboratories where I work. It is only a few minutes in the electric passenger-car. Ah, it is a wonderful fuel I have produced! It puts the best grade of Metellex in the shade, believe me! Light as air, less than two grams per cubic centimetre. Ignites from absolute zero after a bare seven minutes in the heating-coils. Such a kick! Swish! Acceleration—seventy metres-per-second per second! You never saw the like! Would you like some coffee before we leave?"

"No, thank you very much."

The two men stood up, talking excitedly.

"Oh, before we go, I must show you these."

The engineer eagerly displayed crumbling yellow rock in its glass case, from the Sea of Serenity, the bronze model of the soaring machine in the corner, with its stiff curling flames, and the sketch above the mantel of the Crater of Copernicus. Then they went into the study, ignoring Ilse, who remained on the sofa looking bored. The visitor was shown some publications and original papers, composed by the engineer himself. Finally, Lieben pulled up his right sleeve and brought to light some scars on his elbow, where, two years before, he had been caught in an explosion which no one had calculated.

At last they walked through the front door, Guidance finding time to speak briefly to Ilse over his shoulder.

"*Guten Morgen!*"

The door slammed and they were gone.

Ilse pulled off her huge hat.

“ I don’t understand,” she said to the maid, “ how they can be so serious and absorbed in such a thing, when——”

She stopped, because any mention of the earth’s doom caused the maid to go into hysterics.

“ Anyway,” she sighed, “ Mr. Guidance looks as if he has caught on—we shall die rich ! ”

CHAPTER IV

MAY 19TH AND 20TH, 1992

GUIDANCE returned to lunch, and Ilse was treated to another hour of Fuel. They conversed, as if magnificently indifferent to Doom. Ilse got the impression that an introduction of that subject would be considered extremely bad taste. Of world-panic and world-end there was no mention—there had been no such reference since that awkward moment in the morning.

They went out again and came back in the evening, and to her horror Ilse heard her father announce that Guidance had consented to stay the night in their house.

But, to her agreeable surprise, when they were sitting in the lounge after dinner, their visitor assumed quite a social air, and even went so far as to hint at the possibilities of a game of bridge. Lieben got out the cards at once.

Ilse began to enter into the spirit of this affair. This was rather thrilling. Here were three intelligent and sane people, calmly amusing themselves at cards, while the street outside the windows was lit by the light of Arion ! She looked at Guidance, if not with respect, at least with interest and curiosity, while she observed her father in a new light.

She was quite moved when Guidance began to talk casually of trivial affairs.

"I wonder if there is anything in this dignity business?" she asked herself. Certainly it helped one to keep one's head, and even to forget that blue disc dropping from the sky.

Guidance talked about his young cousin, Tim. Ilse felt a faint sense of incongruity, which she had sometimes felt before when an efficient machine-like man of business had revealed suddenly that he was a human being after all, and had such things as relations and personal opinions.

"Yes, Tim's the only relation I've got," remarked Guidance, puffing at one of Lieben's cigars, the leaf for which had been obtained from rock-plants in a hollow in the side of the great lunar Crater of Pluto. "Just a kid, at a school in England. I shall be running up to see him either to-morrow or the day after, I expect. That reminds me—have you such a thing as a rocket time-table I could consult?"

"Yes, I believe we've got a *soarer* time-table somewhere knocking around," replied Ilse, putting an accent on "soarer."

"Good. He's a queer little chap, Tim. Do you know what he did while I was still in Bombay? He actually went to the post office on his own initiative, and telephoned to me by radio-telephone!"

"Children seem able to do anything nowadays," remarked the engineer, lighting a cigar by means of an electric sparker. "I heard of a boy of sixteen who stole a single-seater soarer, and flew to a height of five kilometres."

Lieben set out on a long and wandering reminiscence.

After that, Ilse decided that she must show a brave face as well, so she began to talk in a manner which was just a shade too casual about the Gräfin von Freiburg, and her secretaryship, and the Sunday-school pupil who had asked her if soaring machines would ever get as far as Heaven.

"I've been in several parts of the sky," said Guidance, "and I've been to the other side of the moon and back, but I don't remember striking a place called Heaven."

The old engineer laughed, and then, as if he was rather ashamed of his flippancy, he remarked :

"It's not because Heaven is too far for soaring machines, but because it is too near."

When they had been playing bridge for an hour and a half, they tired of cards, and Ilse suggested four-sided chess. This was a game that had been revived recently by an Ohio Amerindian ; the moves were similar to chess, but all four sides of the board were used instead of only two, making it much more complicated and full of incident.

"But there are only three of us," remarked Guidance.

"Oh, that's all right. I'll get Gersche, our maid—she can play."

"Fine !"

The people of the tenth decade had attained a better understanding of the ways of maids and servants ; they treated them as if they were as good and intelligent as any other human beings. With universal education, servants were encouraged to join in anything they wished, and were very often chosen for their social assets rather than for their manual or cooking abilities. They would have been amazed if they had been treated as anything but equals.

Ilse went into the passage.

"Gersche," she shouted, "leave those dishes and come and have a game of chess, will you?"

There came a clatter from the kitchen, and Gersche appeared in the doorway. She had a round, not too full face, wholly Bavarian, with fair hair and pale blue eyes. She was dressed in thick velvet trousers, covered by a white cotton jacket, to keep off what little dirt there was in the electric kitchen. Also she had on a red bow tie, which looked startling when attached to the large green collar.

She came forward with an astonished expression on her face, and a plate in her hand.

"Fräulein Ilse," she said, "how can you expect me to play chess when we've got less than a week left to live?"

Ilse had half forgotten that there was a cosmic collision due in a few days, and was taken aback. For a moment a vivid and frightful picture leapt into her mind, of millions of creatures crawling and crying in the dust, carried along helplessly on a whirling ball, and a great jagged rock tumbling from the skies. She stiffened with the reality and horror of the vision, then she recovered. To hide her passing terror she pulled the white dust-jacket from Gersche and dragged her along the passage.

"Come on, it's no use thinking about that," she managed to say. "We must try to forget, mustn't we? We all feel as much as you, but—forget—forget——"

The two girls burst into the lounge, almost sobbing. But the men did not notice anything.

"Mr. Guidance, this is Gersche Prengl, our maid from Hohenlinden."

Guidance stood up and shook hands.

At first the girls were too distracted to be able to distinguish bishops from pawns, but soon they calmed down, and began to enjoy the game.

Towards the end of play Guidance made a false check.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss—Gertcher," he said.

"Gersche," corrected Ilse, laughing, and Guidance apologised again.

At the end of the game, the guest confessed that he had enjoyed it very much, and they retired for the night as the ghostly world passed silently by overhead, flooding the streets with unchanging blue.

Next morning Lieben spoke to his daughter.

"Do not prepare lunch to-day, Ilschen—we'll have something in a *café*. Expect us back about eighteen o'clock."

Ilse was disappointed.

She had been so much cheered the night before that she did not like the idea of passing a whole day alone, except for Gersche, whose mournful disposition was depressing. The Gräfin did not want her, for in these days she was incapable of thinking, so there would be nothing to take her mind off Arion. She would just have to wait for the dreadful hour, in the middle of the afternoon, when the blue world would rise and climb up from the horizon, altering the colour of the daytime sky, and putting fear into the very atmosphere. She knew what she would do, if she was in the house when Arion dawned; she would draw all the curtains and switch on the electric gas-tubes, to keep out the ghastly light. The girl had done this more than once before.

When her father and Guidance disappeared through the front door, she decided that she would visit a friend. She could not, dared not, remain inactive.

She was fitting on her grey pill-box hat when the door was opened again, and in walked her father and Guidance.

"Whatever is the matter? Have you forgotten something?"

"What do you think!" exclaimed the engineer. "The passenger-car service is on strike! The drivers and conductors have stopped working—refuse to work any longer! Do you hear that row outside? There's a free fight going on in the next street."

For a moment they stood looking at one another. They were silently wondering, if things were already as bad as this, what would be the dreadful condition of things on the eve of the last day.

"I'll telephone for a cab," said Ilse.

Her father came to her and spoke in a low voice.

"Before you do that, Ilschen, I think there's something else you'd better do first. Order in a good supply of groceries—you never know what's going to happen. Also a gross of candles, as it won't be long before the lighting supplies fail. Add anything else we may need as well. It will be wise to be prepared. I hope to goodness the prices haven't risen any higher than they were last week-end. Run along now."

A few minutes later Ilse came back from the telephone, which was in a room by itself, with a door opening into the dining-room.

"No taxis or cabs can be got anywhere in Munich," she announced breathlessly, "for less than five hundred marks! It's dreadful!"

"We'll walk," said Lieben briefly. "It isn't very far, Ilschen," he added, over his shoulder, "it's quite possible we may not be able to get any lunch in a *café*, so don't be surprised if we come back here. Oh, and don't forget to bolt the front door. There was some daylight looting yesterday in the Wilhelmstrasse. Why have you put on your hat? You weren't going out, were you? It's hardly advisable for you to go out alone."

The girl decided to stay in, and make the best of Gersche's company.

The men did not return, and she was annoyed, because she had carefully prepared some lunch.

At fifteen-ten promptly, Ilse and the maid drew the curtains and switched on the lights, in order to shut out the sight of the sky, which was already changing colour towards the east.

Twenty minutes later the lights failed abruptly. Ilse looked at the fuses, but none had blown. Gersche lit a number of candles, and there they sat, waiting in the faint barbaric light, women of the tenth decade, on the eve of the twenty-first century.

Suddenly the ground shook, ornaments fell off the mantels, the bronze model soarer fell to the floor and was damaged, some of the delicate "flames" being broken off, while every window in the house was shattered. Waves of terrible rolling sound poured in. Their ear-drums echoed and re-echoed, they could hardly keep their feet, and were almost senseless with terror. The candles fell over and became extinguished.

Gersche fell on her knees and screamed wildly.

"The end of the world! It's come already!"

Something heavy seemed to hit the roof, and she began to recite the Lord's Prayer, very rapidly and incoherently.

Nothing more happened, so Ilse re-lit some of the candles. They calmed down gradually as the silence continued. She walked slowly to and fro, but Gersche remained kneeling on the floor, as if transfixed. She was weeping silently.

Suddenly there was a thunderous knock on the front door, but Ilse did not dare to open it. Then there was the sound of people running, some screams, a scuffle in the street, and a man outside the door began groaning and shouting.

To drown the awful noise, Ilse turned on the radio, which was driven by a "Long-Life Battery Plant," installed in the cellar.

"Transport is almost at a standstill in the city," announced the loud-speaker. "A fire has broken out in the southern suburbs, covering several acres, and the firemen despair of getting control over it. It was started by the blowing-up of the entire Munich Central Gasworks, apparently due to neglect, or absence of the workmen. It is stated that not a single portion of the Gasworks or the adjoining buildings are left standing. Two hundred houses have collapsed, and Königstrasse, the road leading up to the premises, has disappeared. So far no sign has been found of the Church of Theosophy, which used to stand at the end of the road. The hood of an automobile came down in the Wilhelmplatz, and knocked over a lamp-post. The top of one of the gasometers landed two and a half kilometres away on the main road to Hohenlinden,

"A piece of wreckage dropped into a village half a kilometre to the south—it is believed to be a domestic bath. Shortly afterwards the upper half of a house arrived.

"Since early this morning there has been much looting and rioting in the city, and many shops have been broken into. Householders are warned to guard their property. It is impossible to ask the police to assist, as, unfortunately, most of the police force are also engaged in rioting.

"Further reports will be issued in half an hour, if circumstances permit."

It seemed to be fairly quiet outside the house now. A sharp sound, like the shot of a revolver, came from the end of the street, and there was a distant murmur, as of many people shouting, from the direction of the centre of the city.

Ilse went fearfully to one of the shattered front-windows and looked out into the street. There was nothing human in sight, except a pair of feet in muddy boots of someone lying on his back just outside the front door.

The man must either be drunk or dead. It struck her that it would be an unpleasant shock for her father, when he returned home, to find a dead man sprawling over his doorstep. She decided that she would open the door and remove the body. It was no use asking the morbid Gersche for help ; in any case she was quite strong enough to do it herself.

She paused with her hand on the bolt. It would certainly be very unpleasant if the man was merely drunk. She looked to see if the feet were moving. No, they were quite still. She made up her mind.

But she was stopped by the sound of footsteps and voices—it was too late now. She could hear her father, and Guidance, and a third unfamiliar voice.

There was an exclamation, then she heard her father shout.

“Come on, we’d better pull this body out of the way. It wouldn’t do to let the girls see this.”

Ilse smiled. Her father was doing for her what she had just been about to do for him.

“The devil!” said the unfamiliar voice. “There’s a table on the roof, impaled on the chimney!”

Through a window she watched the two boots dragged out of sight. Then she ran back to the kitchen, to rouse Gersche from her stupor of terror.

“Quick, get up,” she exclaimed, pulling the girl to her feet. “They are coming back, and they’ve got someone else with them. Make yourself presentable, for goodness’ sake.”

The door-bell rang, so Ilse went to unbolt the door while Gersche dried her eyes and pulled herself together.

Her father and Guidance stepped in, carrying rifles; there was a stranger behind them, standing rather awkwardly on the doorstep, and he also was carrying a rifle. The two men held their rifles as if they had done so all their lives, but the third handled his differently—not so much as if he had never carried one, but as if he had never even seen one before.

He stood peering round the shoulder of the massive Guidance.

He was a Frenchman, in the early twenties, with a vivid, sharply defined face, and bare-headed. He was a tall man, but he did not look it beside Guidance, who

could stand comparison with the tallest. He was dressed neatly in a brown leather smock, with knee-breeches of the same material, and his hair was glistening and flat.

There was something familiar about his face, but Ilse could not place him. He had rather pale youthful cheeks, clear eyes, a nose which was perfectly straight and delicately cut, and a good-humoured mouth.

Lieben started on an attempt to explain away the presence of so many rifles, but thought better of it, and turned round to introduce the stranger. He need not have bothered to explain anything to Ilse, for the situation was perfectly clear, and she was far more capable in an emergency than her father.

"Come right in," said the engineer. "Ilse, this is Monsieur Grindin, an acquaintance of Mr. Guidance. Monsieur Grindin, my daughter Ilse."

The stranger shook hands with Ilse, dropping his rifle in the process.

Paul Grindin! She remembered him now. The man in the newspaper!

Guidance and Lieben left their rifles in the hall-way, so the Frenchman did not bother to pick his up. They drifted into the lounge, except the engineer, who stayed behind to bolt the front door securely.

When this was done, he went to the lounge, hesitated, then returned, giving the front door a tug, to make certain it was fast. On the way back to the lounge he gave the barometer a hearty rap in an absent-minded manner, but did not stop to see if the pointer moved at all.

Unfortunately Ilse had had no time to take away the candles from the lounge and draw back the curtains

from the broken windows. But no one commented upon this ; they seemed determined to take everything unusual for granted.

There was a rapid whispered consultation in the doorway between the engineer and his daughter, while the others were finding seats.

" Shall I pull the curtains back ? " asked Ilse. " The smashed windows will look awful."

" No," he whispered, " best leave them as they are. Perhaps, when *they* come, and see the drawn curtains, they may think this is a house of mourning, and show more respect for it, you see ? "

" They ? " asked Ilse, frowning.

" A mob of factory workers have run mad," whispered her father cautiously, " and they're heading this way. Run along to the kitchen, will you, and ask Gersche to make some coffee or something."

When, a few minutes later, the maid came with a coffee tray, she was half-paralysed by the sight of the three rifles lying in the passage, and for its safety Ilse had to take the tray from her.

It was a chilly evening, and the company was sitting on two of the sofas drawn up to the fire.

" What brings you to Munich, Monsieur Grindin ? " asked Lieben in French.

" Oh, I was on my way to Paris from Bombay, and was not in any particular hurry, so I thought I would remain here for a day or two."

Actually it was nothing of the kind, though Grindin would never have confessed it. The nervous Frenchman had been returning to Paris because conditions were very grave in Bombay, and he thought he would feel safer among his French friends. When he had alighted

at Munich to catch the Paris soarer connection, he happened to read in a newspaper that several serious riots had just taken place in Paris, and that the Opéra had been sacked and burnt to the ground. He began to reconsider his decision, and to wonder whether he had been wise after all to leave India. Things seemed more or less quiet in Bavaria, or at least as quiet as could be hoped, so he made up his mind to stay here some time. He took his luggage to his usual hotel, which lay in the southern district of the city.

Coming away from there, he went for lunch to a restaurant in the city centre, where by accident he met his friend, Mr. Guidance, and Herr Lieben.

Soon he learned that things were not so quiet in Munich as they seemed. In the middle of the afternoon the three men had been walking along a main road, when suddenly the city was shaken by a heavy explosion and they were blown off their feet by a tremendous gale and deafened by a thunderous sound. There seemed to be a volcanic eruption going on towards the south of the city.

Later Grindin found that his hotel had been made uninhabitable by the Gasworks explosion. His bedroom, together with other important parts of the building, had been wrecked, his luggage could not be disentangled from the debris, and if it had been possible to extricate it, it would certainly not have been of the slightest use.

When the engineer learned of this disaster, he invited the Parisian to stay at his house ; he felt that he had to make up somehow for the inhospitable manner in which Munich had received Grindin.

When the Parisian tried to explain his presence in

Bavaria, he was not as glib as he might have been : for the same reason that he fled from Bombay, he declined to arrive in Paris. It struck him now that it would not matter where he went ; he would not be able to escape the dangers of the world panic.

For several days now Grindin had felt an almost continuous alarm, which he found difficult to conceal, and which he could not annul by philosophical arguments, because he did not know any.

But when he had been sitting an hour or two in the lounge of the engineer's house, he felt this sense of alarm leaving him. He wondered why this was, and tried to trace out the thread of his sensations. Eventually, somewhat to his surprise, he tracked it down to the presence of Ilse, the engineer's daughter, whom he had never seen before in his life.

Dusk fell. It seemed curious to be sitting there, talking, by the weird fire-light, and that cast by the five flickering candles. It was possible to forget that, just outside the door, a city was slowly going mad, and death was dropping from the sky.

Later Gersche came in and joined in the conversation. Her nerves seemed to have improved.

Remembering that the Frenchman was a geologist, Ilse turned to him.

"I used to attend some weekly lectures in geology at the Rathaus——"

All conversation ceased suddenly.

In the distance could be heard a throbbing, and a roaring sound, like the voices and the tramping of a large number of people.

Lieben motioned the words " They're coming " with his lips, and signed to everyone to be quiet.

With incredible speed the sounds drew near, till they were almost deafening—shouts, screams, trappings. Not far away there was an interchange of rifle shots.

Then, abruptly and unexpectedly, the noise receded. The looters must have passed down an adjacent street.

“I went to a series of ten geology lectures,” continued Ilse coolly, “the winter before last, but I’m afraid I can’t remember much of it now.”

Gersche had restrained herself while the danger was near, but now she rushed from the room, weeping. Ilse followed her, and Grindin confirmed his idea that his feeling of calmness was mainly due to her presence, because now he felt an undue alarm creeping back.

Lieben switched on the radio, and they learned that the fire in the southern quarters of the city was still spreading rapidly, and that two more had started in the east.

No one felt like playing chess that night.

PART II

CHAPTER V

THE LAST WEEK

IN the mountain fastnesses of New Zealand there was an observatory where working conditions were maintained till the last.

The astronomer, Hergesheimer, and his small staff lived alone on the eastern slopes of Mount Franklin, and they had just received a six weeks' supply of food from Kaikoura. They were so far from habitations that they could remain there, untroubled physically by the great world excitement, and they determined to keep on observing the blue planet as long as they were able. They worked in order to preserve their sanity, not from any thought of advancing knowledge ; no abstract principles of truth guided their patient fingers—they had nothing else to do !

Five days from the end, at four in the afternoon of May 20th, Hergesheimer made an incredible discovery.

On the previous night, his assistant had taken several photographs of Arion at various times during its transit, and Hergesheimer was working on the unprinted negatives. After he had measured the apparent diameter, he checked the orbit, in order to while away another half-hour.

Suddenly his assistant was startled to see him running towards him, plainly in a state of high excitement,

waving a writing-pad in his hand. He was puffing and gasping—Hergesheimer was prone to over-eating.

"Dickens," he cried, "look this over, will you, and tell me whether I'm in my right senses!"

Dickens looked at the paper curiously, and began to scribble. A few minutes later he stood up, bewilderment on his face.

"But these figures show that Arion's orbit——"

"Does not intersect that of the earth! Exactly!"

"Can everyone else be mistaken, except ourselves! The Astronomer-Royal——"

"To the devil with him, and the rest. Our results agree."

"This, then, means——"

"There will be no collision! Dickens, we must see if the telegraph cables are still working. The beam-wireless was suspended last week. We will operate the cables ourselves, if need be."

Five hours later, the inhabitants of all the large cities had learnt the amazing news. An Australasian told them that the earth was saved!

The astronomers were indignant. Absurd! Had they not measured and checked the orbit of Arion a score of times?

But that night they took fresh exposures, and repeated their calculations. It was impossible, but Hergesheimer was right!

A tumult swept round the world. The orbit was no longer what it had been. But what unutterable force had performed this cosmic miracle? Every sect claimed that it was *their* prayers alone that had saved the world. As for the professors, they could no longer think.

How near, then, would the blue planet approach the earth? At the nearest, at more than twice the distance of the moon—that is, some six hundred thousand miles from centre to centre. There would be no serious danger, the only effect being an alteration in the tides, and some perturbations in the earth's orbit.

“Don't be so sure!” said the President of the Republic of Siam. “The orbit has altered once; it may alter again.”

But three-quarters of the world became optimists, and hope predominated.

The day of doom came, and was past! No one feared any longer. Festivals and orgies, joyful religious meetings and triumphal rejoicings, were held in all parts of the globe. Measures were taken to annihilate the plagues and restore order.

A great storm of derision arose against the astronomers. They had suavely pointed out that a planet had sprung from nowhere, and prophesied the end of the world! Millions had perished, misery and disease had strangled the nations, but now, when the time had come, they said they had made a mistake, and it wasn't the end of the world after all! Could scientists be trusted any longer? Was there any more faith in figures, or sense in science?

On May 30th, five days after the “day of doom,” the blue planet was due to arrive at its nearest point to the earth. It grew larger and larger until the moon could barely be noticed, and many people could not escape acute anxiety when looking at it. So greatly did Arion dominate the heavens, that the period was afterwards referred to as the time of the “blue days.”

On May 26th, when there were still four days to go before the juncture, a strange advertisement appeared in the international newspapers, which had already recommenced circulation. Intense excitement, derision, and laughter, were created by this memorable paragraph :

“ Mr. Henry Guidance, of the Bombay Institute of Technology, wishes to announce that he is refitting the *Soaring Rocket No. III* for an attempted expedition to the planet Arion. Five able men are required at once, of good scientific ability, who are willing to contribute capital to the enterprise, and to share the unknown hardships and dangers.”

The surprising brevity of this announcement was not its least remarkable feature.

Most people had heard of Guidance ; the story of the end of his first two soaring machines was household property.

He had suffered two enormous losses ; now, like the famous maker of airships, Santos-Dumont, he was rising again with undiminished energy. But what a daring proposition ! In a few hours hundreds of enquiries reached him, and he found it necessary to make several statements to the Press.

Hitherto the only heavenly body that had been reached by the soaring machines was the moon ; the other planets were too far. Here was a magnificent opportunity, for the blue planet was only twice the distance of the moon ! It was just possible for a large soaring machine to carry enough fuel and food for the journey there and back. Guidance had much reason on his side.

The world waited curiously, to see if the five men could be found. There was no need to fear ; there were seven hundred and twenty-three applicants.

Guidance had no time to lose ; he made his choice, and sent the rest grumbling about their business. It was only fair that Hergesheimer and Dickens, of Franklin Observatory, New Zealand, should be included ; they were regarded as the saviours of the world's sanity. Hesker of Czechoslovakia was also one of the chosen ; he had a proprietary interest in Arion, though he was still feeling ruffled because the blue planet had not been named Titanus.

Henry Guidance had opened an office in Potsdam on May 28th, where he received the applicants. One of the first was a tall dark man, who presented him with papers of reference, and said that his name was Dr. Nacht. He spoke so keenly of his enthusiasm for the proposed expedition that Guidance found it difficult to refuse him : the leader had no idea that the doctor was mad, an escaped inmate of a Brunswick Asylum.

Then there was Mr. Alfred Smith, the surgeon from the Isle of Wight, whose pale face had a rather convincing air ; he was accepted.

Herr Otto Lieben of Munich had to go, in order to look after his new engine, and administer his new fuel.

Paul Grindin, the timid Parisian, Grindin who felt nervous even in an automobile, unaccountably insisted on coming.

While Guidance was busy looking up references and making telephone calls, his old friend, Gystak, of the *Stuttgart Tageblatt*, burst in upon him.

"Good morning, Mr. Guidance," he said, in his cheerful manner, "I see you are very busy."

"Very busy indeed, Mr. Gystak, but never too busy to speak to you. Do you want an article for your paper?"

"I do not belong to a paper now, Mr. Guidance, if you will but say the word."

"What do you mean?"

"Wasn't I a good enough pilot to fly the Soaring Rocket Number Two to the moon and back? Am I not good enough to fly Number Three to Arion?"

"But I thought you had lost your nerve after the accident?"

"That was a long time ago! Besides, Arion is much more interesting than the moon!"

"Then, if you feel fit for it, I have no hesitation in offering you the post of chief pilot."

"Fine, Mr. Guidance!"

The rest of that day, Mr. Guidance found himself distracted with the enormous amount of organisation that had to be settled in a very short time. There were thousands of pounds worth of scientific equipment to be bought, catalogued, and packed, and that, too, when trade was still disorganised. There was the technical crew of three to select, men of the highest ability and training. Preserved foods of every kind had to be ordered, and a score of irritating details attended to. This was something more than a pleasure excursion to the moon and back. Emergencies had to be provided for in advance, as far as possible; oxygen supplies to last a long time had to be taken; no one knew what might happen!

In view of all this necessary arrangement, and the restricted time, Guidance could not pay much attention to the references of his passengers, though he took

especial care over the essentials, such as the ten known crew of three.

On opening his office he had sent to all those who had wired him they would take part in the flight to Arion, and whom he had accepted, the following telegram :

Your presence is requested to-morrow May 29th
at 103 Kaiserplatz Schwabing Munchen Bavaria
Guidance.

Guidance wanted everyone to meet before the flight, for many reasons besides social. It was certainly desirable that they should become acquainted with each other before leaving, and he wanted various personal details, which he thought fit to obtain in this way.

He decided on Munich for the meeting-place because it occupied a central position in Europe, and was equal in importance to Berlin ; moreover, it was a mere three hundred miles from Berlin, less than an hour's journey by express soarer, and only half that distance from Prague, the capital of Hesper's country. It would save time : for Hesperheimer and Dickens would have to come like lightning from New Zealand.

But the main reason was that he wished to be there in person, because he had to see to the transportation of Lieben's special fuel, which was being made in large quantities. He did not believe in asking anyone to do anything important, or vital for his purpose, if he could possibly do it himself.

Engineer Lieben had consented reluctantly to the use of his house for the meeting. The affair had been sprung upon him rather unfairly, in such a manner that he could hardly refuse without giving offence.

At times Guidance could summon a certain impelling manner and a persuasive voice, which was extraordinarily irritating but impossible to oppose, while having the appearance of being nothing more than a request, or even a hint.

It was all very well in a way ; he wanted to see them all together in one place, for an hour or so, and it was not worth while going to any expense in the way of entertainment.

But Lieben took an exaggerated view of the importance of the occasion ; he felt worried at the responsibility which Guidance had put upon him, and it caused a stir in the household.

As a result, there were numerous hurried consultations between Lieben, his daughter, and Gersche.

"I wonder what exactly he wants me to provide for them?" grumbled the engineer. "I'm not made of money."

"Not yet," retorted Ilse.

"Let me see—just how many will there be, anyway? There will be Mr. Smith, Mr. Hesker, Dr. Somebody——"

"Dr. Nacht?"

"And our handsome Parisian——"

"And the pilot?"

"That's Mr. Gystak, the journalist fellow."

"The New Zealand people."

"Ah, yes, Hergesheimer and Dickens, of course. Then the mighty Henry Guidance himself, and we two."

"That makes ten."

"Quite enough! Ilschen, tell Gersche to make a note of that number. Ten people, including everybody.

I wish to goodness Mr. Guidance would let me know what I am to do with them."

"Why don't you ask him, father?"

"Oh, I can't very well do that. Do you know anything about entertaining?"

"Hardly, seeing that I've never had any practice."

"Well, I'm not going further than coffee, and perhaps wine. That's flat. I don't have to be obliging to Guidance, just because he's going to pay me a generous sum for my engine and fuel. After all, I've earned it! If he wants anything more elaborate, he'll just have to take them to an hotel, that's all."

"Don't you worry, father, I'm sure he means it to be an informal meeting, and it won't last very long. With so many distinguished people coming to our house, there's bound to be some newspaper men here. We may even get our pictures in the papers!"

"That's true," said Lieben, pleased at the thought. "That reminds me—we'd better get those upstairs windows cleaned. They were looking very dirty this morning."

"It may be risky anticipating our coming wealth," muttered Ilse, "but I'm going to buy myself a new dress."

During this hubbub and bustle, Gersche was wondering if it would be wise to ask for a rise in wages so soon.

As it happened, the Gräfin von Freiburg had little need of her secretary as yet, since she had not recovered completely from her paralysing fright at her narrow escape from being crushed between earth and Arion, like flour between millstones. At the most, Ilse had

only to attend an hour or two daily, to deal with correspondence.

The girl was seriously thinking of abandoning the secretaryship altogether, on account of her father's happy success in perfecting his fuel ; but she decided that it might be premature. Also she did not want to rush off and resign straight away, as she felt this would be too obviously a confession that she preferred a life of idleness to a life of labour.

Meanwhile she had plenty of spare time in which to help Gersche to get the place tidy. All traces of the terrible Gasworks explosion had been cleared up ; new panes of glass were in the windows ; new ornaments had been bought to replace those that had been smashed ; also the table that had fallen on the roof had been taken away.

On the morning of May 29th, Gersche dressed herself in a brand-new, and very becoming, plus-four suit. It was made neatly in dark brown leather, covered with red zigzags, with voluminous branching tassels hanging from the garters. She wore a crimson tie, and large plush epaulets. The ensemble gave her a charming old-fashioned air. At the last moment, she decided to wear an imitation African sun-helmet on her head, which added a last perfecting touch.

The busy Guidance, arrived from Potsdam, had imposed his presence overnight, unasked, and after breakfast he and Lieben set off for the fuel laboratories. At the same time, Ilse left the house as well, in order to get rid of the morning's correspondence at the Gräfin's residence.

Her employer was still in bed when she arrived, and she did not make an appearance all the morning.

Ilse went through the letters, then returned home for lunch. When she got back, Gersche showed her a mysterious oblong parcel that had been sent.

"Whatever is it?" she asked.

"I've no idea, Ilse. The man who brought it did not know himself. He said it had to be delivered for Mr. Guidance, and there was nothing to pay."

"Oh, well, I suppose it will have to stay here till he comes. Not content with using our house as an hotel, he has converted it now into a left-luggage office. Not that it matters! But we'd better carry it into the kitchen, hadn't we? It's far too bulky to leave in the passage—all our guests will be stumbling over it."

With some difficulty, Ilse and Gersche managed to carry the package out of the way. This task was just finished when the door-bell rang, in a rather timid fashion.

"Surely this isn't the guests starting to come already!" exclaimed Ilse. "The meeting is supposed to be this afternoon, fifteen o'clock!"

Ilse answered the ring. To her surprise there was a little boy, of twelve or thirteen, standing on the doorstep with a case in his hand. Behind him a taxi was waiting.

He was dressed expensively in a leather travelling suit, but his hair, which displayed countless curls, was uncovered to the wind. His eyes were of a very dark blue, while his small face was pale but not unattractive. He looked quite at ease, although he appeared to have travelled a long distance.

"May the sun never stop shining!" he greeted Ilse, precociously, in English. "Please, miss, is this a hundred and three, Kaiserplatz?"

"*Jawohl*. Yes, indeed. Where are you from?"

"Bath."

"Bath?"

"Yes, I'm Tim. My name's Tim Guidance."

"Oh— *Himmel*, are you the cousin of Mr. Henry Guidance?"

"Well, yes, but I call him uncle. He asked me to come here so that I can see him fly off to Arion."

"Indeed! Yet he did not arrange to meet you, nor did he tell us you were coming! That's just like him. Come right in! Have you paid the taxi? All right, taxi, you needn't wait."

Tim came in and removed his travelling-suit, showing a blue sailor suit beneath.

"The cheek of him," whispered Gersche to Ilse, "telling Tim to come here, and not letting us know!"

"Have you a holiday from school, Tim?" asked Ilse, in a friendly manner, though she was feeling very indignant.

"Not exactly," replied the boy. "You see, there isn't any school left. There was a riot, and a lot of fighting, and it got burnt down. There's nothing left of it, and I haven't been taken to another one yet."

"Oh, I hope you didn't get hurt? Did you try to stop them from setting the school on fire?"

"Not exactly," retorted Tim, in a casual manner. "As a matter of fact, it was I who started the fire."

Gersche coughed, and Ilse thought she had better change the subject.

"Would you like some lunch with us now, Tim, or did you get something on the journey?"

"No fear! Uncle told me not to bother, as I should be certain of getting some here."

"Oh! Well, then, Gersche, we'd better have lunch right away."

The maid took hold of the boy's case, to take it away, but she dropped it on hearing a kind of squeaking noise coming from it.

"What on earth's that? What are those holes in the case for?"

"Oh, that's only Timothy," replied the boy.

He opened the case and out jumped a large black cat and three kittens.

Not knowing what to expect next, Ilse went into the dining-room and they began lunch.

It was not long after the meal when the door-bell rang again.

"I hope that is Mr. Guidance and father," exclaimed Ilse. "It's high time they were back."

Gersche went to the door and announced Mr. Hergesheimer and Mr. Dickens.

"For goodness' sake," whispered Ilse, "clear out Tim Guidance's menagerie!"

While Gersche was bundling Tim, the cat, and the three kittens into the kitchen, Ilse showed the two men into the lounge.

"Well, you're the first arrivals," she said pleasantly. "Now isn't that remarkable, when you've had the furthest distance to come?"

"All the way from Mount Franklin," said Hergesheimer. "But we always do things slick in New Zealand, you know."

He took off his helmet and his stiff hair sprang up. At first sight his eyes were rather startling, for one was blue and the other grey, but people soon became used to it,

So this was the man who had saved the sanity of the world ! It must have taken some courage to announce his discovery, in the face of the opposition of all the other astronomers—to say that Arion was really not going to hit the earth at all, when everybody else was going mad, because they were assured it would !

Ilse was surprised when she looked at his assistant, Mr. Dickens, for he seemed so extraordinarily young, despite his pale face and gloomy air—far too young for a dangerous expedition into unknown space. Yet he was old enough to have been married some time ; for so long, indeed, that he was on very bad terms with his wife, as Gystak, the scandal hound, had told her.

Dickens seemed to find it difficult to attend to the details of life, such as the casual remarks and pleasantries of other people ; it was Hergesheimer who did all the talking, and plenty at that.

“Thank goodness we weren’t here when all the trouble was going on. It must have been pretty bad in the cities. Did you get much of it here, Fräulein Lieben ? ”

“Well, yes, it certainly was—trying.”

“While we, you see, were safe and snug in our observatory on Mount Franklin, with enough supplies to last ages, and no one to trouble us ! ”

“You were certainly very lucky to escape all the excitement, Mr. Hergesheimer.”

Not long afterwards, Paul Grindin arrived, to Ilse’s relief.

“Thank goodness,” she muttered, “at any rate here’s someone I know.”

Then Gystak arrived. As the little man stepped into the lounge, he said :

“ Good afternoon, gentlemen. I’m just in time, as there’s going to be a shower. A few drops had started to come down when I rang the bell.”

He was right. It came on to rain heavily, and Gersche had to shut all the windows. Ilse was annoyed, because she suspected her father had not taken a coat with him.

Dr. Nacht came ; he was a dark man, who rather frightened Ilse ; he was accompanied by Mr. Alfred Smith, the English surgeon from the Isle of Wight, a markedly morbid person.

“ We bumped into each other at the Soarer Terminus,” explained Nacht, in a deep Teutonic voice.

CHAPTER VI

CONFERENCE

THERE was still no sign of Lieben or Guidance, and Ilse was feeling put out.

During a particularly violent burst of rain, which rattled loudly against the brand-new window-panes, the overworked door-bell gave out another ring.

"Surely, this time," thought Ilse, "it must be they."

She opened the front door, but there, to her disappointment, stood another stranger in the teeming rain. He had a face which unmistakably belonged to the eastern side of Europe, strongly marked, obviously capable of expressing much feeling. And there was real humour, a sarcastic humour, behind those eyes.

He was wet through. His raincoat was too thin to be of any use ; water was dripping off the brim of his soft hat, streaming down his cheeks and neck.

"I'm Mr. Hesker," he said, hurriedly stepping in. "May the sun never stop shining !" he added ironically, and Ilse laughed.

"You are certainly wet, Mr. Hesker ! Come right in and get dried. I'm Ilse Lieben, Herr Lieben's daughter."

Ah, here was a real man, the girl decided, while

she shook the water from his hat. An intelligent man, with a reasonable sense of humour.

"*Himmel!*" said Gersche, in an undertone. "Wherever has Herr Lieben gone?"

Ilse was feeling worried. Here was a roomful of people, and she did not know what to do with them. She walked self-consciously round the lounge, and looked through the window at the pouring rain.

A brief diversion was caused by the escape of one of the kittens. It slipped through the door and raced round the lounge, closely followed by Gersche, who hunted it out again.

It struck Ilse that it would be a good idea to turn on the radio. Why hadn't she thought of that before? She switched it on, and the room was filled with a voice:

"We will now play you a jazz number, *In a Soarer in the Blue*——"

Gersche meantime opened the front door and in walked Henry Guidance. Flinging off his coat, he stepped straight into the lounge.

"Please, Miss Ilse," he said, with enough irritation to show that he was in a hurry, "do turn off that radio! How on earth shall I be able to hear myself speak?"

Naturally, he would have to come in just then! Firstly, he had burdened her with the responsibility of entertaining his guests by failing to appear at the time he had himself appointed; then he was annoyed at her for doing her best to amuse them! Ilse was working up quite a lot of cumulative indignation this afternoon, in the way known only to women.

"Well, how are you, gentlemen?" continued

Guidance, when the radio was turned off. He wiped the raindrops from his face with a handkerchief. "Are we all here?" He made a rapid mental count. "Eight. Yes, that's fine. Everyone is present except Herr Lieben, who'll be here in a minute or two, and our three technical crew. We shall soon be able to proceed."

"Your young cousin has arrived from Bath, by the way," remarked Ilse, "and also an extremely heavy parcel. They are both in the kitchen."

"Oh, that's fine. I'll see Tim presently, but can I have that parcel in here? I shall be wanting it shortly."

"All right, but it's very heavy. M. Grindin, will you help me to fetch it?"

"With pleasure, Mlle. Ilse."

They went down the passage, and reappeared, struggling with the oblong parcel.

"Thanks very much," said Guidance graciously. "Set it down here, will you, in front of the fire?"

Guidance stooped down and cut open the parcel, disclosing to view a kind of metal platform, with a dial attached.

"Whatever have you got here?"

"This is a weighing machine. I want all your weights checked up, if you have no objection. I don't want any slips, or mistaken calculations at the last minute, you know."

Once more the doorbell rang, then there was the sound of a key turning in the lock. This must be the engineer; usually he rang the bell first, then impatiently unlocked the door with his own key, before anyone could come and open it,

"He's here at last," muttered Ilse. "He will be half-drowned."

There came a characteristic knocking sound from the hallway, as Herr Lieben rapped at the barometer-glass.

At the end of a hearty series of taps, there was a sudden loud cracking sound. Ilse dashed out of the lounge. Two jagged lines crossed the misused barometer face, and the outraged pointer was bent beyond repair. It was a calamity, but from that moment the engineer never again touched a barometer, and hardly dared to look at one.

"Now look what you've done!" exclaimed his daughter. "Come in and get your wet things off!"

The engineer obeyed without saying a word. He felt like starting an argument, but he could hardly do so when he was in a room full of people.

Guidance was rather taken aback. Besides his personal horror of birds, he had a few other mental peculiarities. On occasions he was superstitious. Here was Otto Lieben, the man who was supplying the very life-blood of the expedition, the precious and almost miraculous fuel which was to feed the tubes of the soarer, and he had broken glass at the very moment that the final arrangements for the flight were commencing!

Was it an evil omen? Otherwise, why should the glass have broken on that particular day, when the engineer must have tapped it some thousands of times previously? Why should it have cracked at such a significant moment, when all the company was assembled, and within earshot of it? His mind went back to a night, seven years ago, when his brother lay

dying in Hartlepool, yet he had heard the unaccountable ticking of the death-watch in his private room in Bombay, six thousand miles away.

Furtively, he moistened a finger and traced a cross on the front of his jacket.

Gystak came up to him with a note-book and pencil.

"Well, I'm ready, Mr. Guidance, to take down all the details you want."

Guidance banished the foolish superstition which had for a moment bothered his mind.

"Will everybody come in rotation and stand on the weighing-machine, please? Mr. Hesker first? Right you are. At the same time, I should like full particulars of your name, age, distinctions, and so on. You will easily understand that I am in rather a hurry, so I must apologise for the informality."

One by one they stood on the machine, and Gystak put their particulars down in his book. When it came to Mr. Hergesheimer's turn, the machine creaked under his weight, which made Gystak look anxious. Finally the pilot himself stood on the platform and recorded his own weight.

"My feather-weight is hardly worth putting down!" he laughed.

"Take care when you're adding up those figures," said Guidance grimly. "Every kilogram is going to count."

"Don't you worry," exclaimed Otto Lieben confidently, "there will be plenty of reserve with my fuel!"

"Before we go any further," said Guidance, standing in front of the fire, and addressing himself to the whole company, "I should like to read a message I

received this morning from his Majesty, George the Seventh, King of England !

“ Here it is :

“ We note with pleasure that you are undertaking a voyage of such scientific magnitude and astronomical importance. We sincerely trust that you will bring it to a successful and safe close. Our good wishes, and those of our country, go with you.

GEORGE REX.”

Ilse felt staggered. Royal patronage ! This was a bigger thing than she had realised.

“ My word,” exclaimed Hesker, the Czech, “ we are causing some stir, aren’t we ? ”

Ilse left the room, saying that she was going to ask the maid for some coffee ; but actually she was going in order to tell her the news.

When she arrived at the kitchen, she found Gersche childishly playing with the cat, while Tim was romping with the kittens. The maid was recalled to gravity when Ilse informed her of the message. Indeed, she was overawed.

“ Surely, I shall be able to ask them for a rise, and, out of very dignity, they won’t be able to refuse,” was the first thought that occurred to her.

When Ilse arrived back in the lounge, she found Guidance explaining to the company what their various duties would be during the voyage, and during their stay on the planet Arion, if they were so lucky as to make a safe landing there.

He laid much stress on the many perils they would probably encounter, and the numerous inconveniences they would certainly suffer, and the quite likely

possibility that the day of the take-off would be the last day on earth they would ever enjoy. Then he asked, in an excessively dramatic fashion, whether anyone wished to withdraw? If they did, they must do so at once, because, after this moment, he would consider the whole thing settled.

Naturally, no one answered.

"What on earth can he be thinking of?" wondered the engineer. "Does he imagine that all these people have journeyed to my house from all parts of the world, and haven't yet made up their minds?"

But Guidance was wise in having everything quite definite and clear, when there was so little time left before the take-off, and when he himself was personally acquainted with so few of the men.

An impatient ring at the front door was heard.

"Oh, Mr. Guidance," said the pilot, "I expect that's my friend from the *Münchner Illustrierte Presse*. He wants an interview, to get some particulars for his paper. I told him you wouldn't mind if he came about this time. Was that all right?"

"Certainly, Mr. Gystak. Show him in. The more press I get, the better for me, and the better I like it!"

By this time the excited Gersche had already let in the reporter, and he entered the lounge, smiling, with a camera in his hand.

There were several curious things which Ilse noticed about the interview. The first was that the dark Dr. Nacht, who had hardly spoken a word the whole afternoon, kept in the background the whole time, especially while the photograph was being taken at the end of the interview. Then Mr. Hesker slipped quietly out of the room while the reporter was in the

act of fixing his camera in readiness to take the photograph.

These things struck her as peculiar, because she did not consider nervousness a trait of either of these men. Hesker was talkative and almost jolly ; Nacht, while reticent and gloomy, was not shy.

Another thing she noticed was that, half-way through the interview, the journalist unobtrusively slipped a folded piece of paper into Gystak's hand. It was done so quickly that she was sure no one else had observed it, and she was also certain that the action had been concealed intentionally.

This struck her as peculiar, because she did not associate Mr. Gystak with anything secretive. She could hardly imagine the small fellow being anything other than frank.

At the end of the interview, when posing in a group for the press photograph, none of the crowding eight remarked on the absence of Hesker.

"I suppose I'd better get out of the way," said Ilse. "You won't want anyone on the print who isn't actually going on the flight."

"Oh come, Fräulein," said Monsieur Grindin, "I am sure the daughter of our estimable engineer should not be left out of the photograph ! You do not mind, Mr. Guidance ?"

"Not at all."

The addition of a charming young lady would probably increase the press value of the picture, so Ilse Lieben knelt on the floor in front of the group.

A blinding flash, and their faces were fixed for ever on the film.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Guidance, for the

time you have allowed me, and the trouble you have taken. I will send you a copy of the *Münchner Illustrierte Presse* to-morrow morning, and you will see the photograph there, and also the account of the interview which you have so kindly given me. Good afternoon !”

The reporter went out, and the group relaxed and broke up.

“These reporters are certainly very courteous,” remarked Guidance.

“Oh,” muttered Gystak, with a bored expression, “we have to learn those little speeches off by heart, you know.”

“Are you then a journalist ?” asked Dr. Nacht.

“I was,” said the pilot, with unnecessary haste. “I used to be on the *Stuttgart Tageblatt*, until Mr. Guidance accepted me as chief pilot for this trip. By the way,” he added, turning to his new employer, “have you any objection to my taking a small motion-picture camera with us ?”

“How much does it weigh ?” asked Guidance instantly.

“Oh, less than a kilogram and a half—a mere trifle !”

The reply was firm.

“A kilogram and a half ! Well, you will have to leave behind a corresponding weight of your other luggage, Mr. Gystak, that’s all ! I can’t allow any particular person any special privileges.”

“Oh, come, Mr. Guidance, think of the scientific value of a visible record of our flight.”

“Why,” added Grindin, “I would willingly leave behind five whole kilograms of provisions, just for the

pleasure of watching a film of our adventure, when we get back."

"Then," remarked Hergesheimer persuasively, "supposing we meet some inhabitants of Arion, if there are any, how interesting it would be to have living pictures of them. People would clamour to see moving views of real-life Arionians!"

"All right, I suppose it would be rather a good thing."

"Then, of course," went on Gystak, in a small voice, "there will be a further kilogram for film reels."

"I'll leave some of my luggage behind, to make up for that," offered Hesker.

"No, no," exclaimed the leader, "a couple of kilograms extra won't matter. That'll do. But I want you to understand clearly, all of you, that there must be no further pleas for anything extra at the last moment. If everyone brings a few pounds extra weight, it will be a serious matter! Is that settled?"

"*Alles erledigt!*"

After this the general business of the meeting was finished, and the party broke up into small conversational groups. Ilse saw the surgeon, Mr. Smith, sitting alone, staring vacantly at the brilliant wallpaper.

She went across and sat down by him.

"You are a very lucky man, Mr. Smith, going away on such an exciting trip as this, while I have to stay behind in this miserable old city."

"Have you a job here, Miss Lieben?" asked Smith listlessly.

"Yes, I am secretary for the Gräfin von Freiburg. You must have heard of her famous necklace, which has been talked about so much in the Press recently?"

"I'm afraid I don't read the papers."

"Ah, if you could only see her! What an opinion she has of herself! The stuff she gives me to type!"

Her conversational bombardment was rewarded by a gradual softening of Mr. Smith's manner, and she left him, well pleased. But when she tried the same line on Mr. Hergesheimer's youthful assistant, she had to give up, wholly unsuccessful, and, with relief, she joined Grindin and Hesker.

Meanwhile Gystak sat down beside Smith, and began to detail his memories of the Soaring Rockets Nos. I and II, which had come to such a disastrous end.

"Do you know, Mr. Smith," he remarked, with much gesticulation, "it was snowing fiercely the day No. I took off, and the heat from the rocket-tubes was so great that the aerodrome became a lake, with the melted snow!"

"Really," said Smith, sitting up. "And did you hear the story about the soarer which sprung a leak half-way to the moon, and the pilot who kept the air in by sitting on the leak?"

Gystak looked annoyed.

Ilse was surveying the room, wondering where Guidance had gone, when she heard excited voices coming up the passage into the hallway. Then Gersche entered the lounge with a coffee-tray, closely followed by Guidance and Tim, who was laughing and holding up the cat by the neck. Guidance had two kittens in his jacket pockets, while a third perched uncertainly on his shoulder.

Ilse blinked at the sight of the dignified Guidance becoming suddenly child-like.

Tim dropped the cat and ran to the piano-stool.

Playing a melody with one finger on the piano, he sang loudly a re-written nursery-rhyme :

*" Little Jack Horner sat in a soarer
Eating some plum and some pie ;
Said little Jack Horner,
It's hot in this soarer,
The friction is awfully high ! "*

Under cover of the noise, Lieben was telling his stock jokes to Dr. Nacht.

" Yes, the old lady had just been left a fortune, so she chartered a soarer to fly round the world. When they had been flying a few thousand miles, she fell asleep, and when she woke, next morning, they were back at the place from which they had started. ' Hell,' she said to the pilot, ' is this all there is of it ? ' Then, you know, she went to the moon, and when they were half-way there, she shouted to the pilot : ' I say, open the window and let in some fresh air ! It's getting stuffy in here ! ' "

" I can't hear a word you say," said Nacht frigidly, " with that boy banging away at the piano like that."

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That night, after everyone had left, Herr Lieben went into the hallway and stared mournfully at the broken barometer.

CHAPTER VII

DEPARTURE

AS the result of enormous effort, everything was in readiness the following morning.

The journey was expected to require two days in either direction, but they would not get there until Arion had passed the nearest point, while if anything delayed their return from Arion, they would find themselves rapidly receding from the earth. They might even have to wait till the next juncture before returning, several months later. This would be fatal, of course, if the blue planet proved uninhabitable.

The chosen nine and the three technical crew were gathered on the best landing field in the world, the Tempelhof Aerodrome, Berlin, by eleven o'clock on the morning of the 30th ; Soaring Rocket No. III lay assembled from parts brought by lorries. Camera-men were taking shots and carrying microphones, and despite the poor visibility, a huge television apparatus was broadcasting to the whole world. It was really a tremendous day ; the very atmosphere seemed charged with tremendousness.

The clever engineer who had designed the propulsion of the soarer, Herr Otto Lieben of Munich, and his athletic daughter, Fräulein Ilse, walked up to the soarer, to see how the preparations were progressing.

Herr Lieben was impatient to see his great engine working, while his daughter was biting her lips, frowning, and putting her hand to her mouth.

Following closely behind them came Alfred Smith, the surgeon, and the Frenchman, Paul Grindin. Strangely, Grindin was not showing the least trace of uneasiness. He was joking with Smith, and each man was carrying a bottle of something ; they climbed up the ladder through the manhole, and soon the sound of popping corks came from the inside of the soarer.

It was a dull day, inclined to be showery occasionally, but there was a reasonably good crowd to watch the send-off. They were due to leave at twelve hours, but owing to several regrettable delays with the transportation facilities, the heavy task of loading and checking the fuel and food, and the careful testing and measuring of the extended runway, the take-off was a good hour late.

The patience of Henry Guidance had long since given out ; it was as much as he could do to speak civilly and politely. The crowd waited patiently and quietly, ignoring the rain.

Guidance had made seven complete inspections of the runway, which had to be extended beyond the usual limits of the aerodrome. He searched intently for any sign of a departure from rigid smoothness, for he wanted to make certain that the soarer would get safely off the ground.

All aerial traffic had been suspended for the moment, or diverted to other aerodromes ; but a constant stream of lorries hurried across the wet grass, unloading, and driving away again. All this material had to be

weighed carefully beforehand, as well as the passengers and crew ; if there was a hundred pounds too much, the soarer would never leave the ground.

Mr. Guidance travelled slowly over the field, in an automobile driven by his friend and chief pilot, Gystak ; they were making a last inspection of the ground, looking for any concealed pits or bumps.

The other passengers, weary with waiting, were standing in groups round the machine, watching the loading processes, while the technical crew trio were busy arranging and packing. They were a relief pilot and two mechanics, and would replace Gystak when the machine was properly in the air ; he would handle the ship at the dangerous moments, for the landing and taking-off.

Two of the passengers were helping to superintend the loading. Hesker, the Czechoslovakian from Königgrat, whose suggested name Titanus for the planet Arion had been rejected, did not seem able to forget this indignity, and he never lost an opportunity of bringing out his pet name in conversation, as if by accident—then apologising ironically.

The other man who was helping to superintend the loading was Dr. Nacht, the determined-looking German, from Frankfort-on-the-Oder ; he was so dark-skinned, dark-haired, and dark-eyed that he looked more like a Spaniard or an Italian.

Hesker and Nacht got on very well together, but neither of them mixed well with the others ; Hesker was never quite frank, always indirect and ironical, while Nacht was handicapped because he could not speak English very well.

While Hesker and Nacht were looking to the loading,

Hergesheimer, the fat New Zealand astronomer, was talking to his young assistant, Dickens, who looked awed by the staring crowd. They appeared depressed, as indeed everyone was, owing to the delay, and they were sheltering under an umbrella.

The spectators were beginning to grumble. Guidance and Gystak returned from their latest inspection of the runway, and had a few minutes heated conversation with Engineer Lieben, whose daughter stood by, feeling embarrassed. The impatient Guidance felt that he *must* argue with someone, in order to relieve his nerves a little.

Fräulein Lieben looked more anxious every moment. She stared furtively round at the crowd, as if she was expecting to see someone she would far rather not see. Whenever she spoke, her voice was unsteady.

From the interior of the soarer came the sound of hilarious laughter, and the chinking of wine-glasses. Grindin and Smith were still drinking.

The leader frowned ; he was all for dignity, and he wished that his friend from flippant Paris would try to remember that he was now in practical Prussia, and that he was about to take part in the most remarkable flight in the history of Rocketeering. The proceedings were sufficiently undignified, with this hour's delay, without people getting drunk as well.

"Look at that lorry," cried Guidance to Gystak, "lumbering at three kilometres an hour over a flat field ! Here, let me talk to them !"

The furious leader jumped into the automobile, and told Gystak to drive him towards the lorry, which was moving in such a disgracefully slow manner.

But before Gystak had time to let in the clutch, it became clear why the lorry was going slow.

Excited cries came from all parts of the field, and people started running. The lorry had caught fire ! When only a hundred yards from the soarer, one of the special-fuel drums had ignited and burst open.

Everybody ran towards it ; policemen gathered together, to push and shout. Firemen came running up with an extinguisher-tank. Guidance and Gystak arrived on the scene in their automobile, jumped out, and waved their arms.

In a few moments the fire was out, and everyone was much relieved to find that only two drums had been destroyed.

As the excitement died down, a further burst of incontinent laughter was heard from within the soarer.

"Damn that Frenchman !" muttered Guidance.

He and his chief pilot were looking at the twisted black drums rather doubtfully.

"Shall I telephone for more fuel, Mr. Guidance ? " asked Gystak.

"No use ! It's this special fuel. We've ordered the lot. They won't have any in stock. We can't wait while they prepare some."

"Still it's only five hundred pounds lost, and we have an ample margin."

"Suppose," mused Guidance, "this accident hadn't happened till the drum was in the soarer."

The last lorry moved off, and nothing remained to be done. The passengers eagerly began to embark, and the spectators, now grown in number, became excited.

Mr. Hergesheimer had his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder when someone pushed forward from the crowd. It was a newsboy, with papers pressed under his arm.

"Here you are, sir. You'll want a paper with you to read, you know, sir!"

The New Zealander could hardly refuse, and bought a paper. He climbed up the ladder and was helped into the interior of the craft.

When everyone was in, the leader of the expedition had a last look round, then went half-way up the ladder, to pose for the press photographers. Then he put his head inside and shouted:

"Is everybody in?"

"Yes, I think so," replied Dr. Nacht.

There was a noise of shouting from the distant aerodrome buildings, and a man was seen to come out, and run towards the soarer, waving his arms.

"Wait a moment there—Herr Lieben is coming!"

"I thought he was in!"

In a few moments he arrived, panting, and in a state of anxiety. He climbed up without a word, and joined the others inside.

"Is anything the matter?" Guidance asked him.

Lieben looked more anxious than ever, and replied in gasps.

"No, nothing whatever, I assure you, Mr. Guidance."

His tone was peculiar and Guidance regarded him curiously for a moment; then he turned away to seek Gystak.

He dashed round a corner of a corridor, and collided with someone who was standing close against the wall. It was a girl, and she was sobbing.

"What is this? Who are you?" he cried astonished.

"Gersche Prengl," she replied, and resumed her sobbing. Lieben's maid! Guidance was enraged—what was she doing here?

"Get out at once, do you hear? We are starting."

Sobbing so much that she had no power to explain her presence, she was helped out of the machine.

Hesker and Nacht were looking out of a porthole to see that there was nothing further that might hinder them. Their horror was great when they heard light footsteps behind, and turning round, perceived Tim walking calmly along the corridor, complete with cat and three kittens.

"Will uncle let me come, do you think?" he asked coolly. Nacht picked up the boy.

"Take him outside," whispered Hesker, "and tell him to run away. Don't breathe a word of this to Guidance, or he'll go nuts."

Protesting sulkily, the boy was removed, and Nacht climbed in again.

The time was drawing near, and there was a tense air. The heavy manhole entrance was lowered with a clang, and Hesker began to screw it into place.

He had given it a few turns, when a fresh commotion was heard outside. A number of people at the hangars were shouting at the tops of their voices, and a group of men appeared to be engaged in a race across the field towards the soarer.

Almost unnoticed, a huge black automobile dashed up the aerodrome drive, sending up sprays of water from the wet roadway, and stopped with a sudden jerk. At once, seven policemen sprang out of the car, and

started running. Someone had climbed up the ladder, and was hammering at the manhole.

Guidance seemed to explode; he had lost all patience. He jerked the manhole open, and pushed his fiery face through the entrance.

"What the hell's the matter now?" he roared.

The man who had just climbed up the ladder gasped, and had to shout, to make himself heard above the general commotion.

"Mr. Guidance," he exclaimed, "I have a very important message for Monsieur Paul Grindin. Tell him to come at once! I regret the necessity of delaying you——"

"This is a fine time to bring messages!"

"But it is really——"

"Go away! Your precious Grindin is lying on a sofa, dead drunk! He wouldn't understand a message if you shouted in his ear! Listen to that!"

From the depths of the soarer floated a drunken song, thickly sung, in French.

*"C'est moi-même, Cocotte,
Qui vous aime!
C'est vous, Cocotte,
Qui——"*

"But really——"

Mr. Guidance ceased to pay any attention to the man on the top of the ladder. He had raised his eyes, to look over the other's shoulder and had seen a remarkable sight.

Two groups of men were charging across the field, shouting hoarsely and vigorously. One group was only a few hundred yards away; the other group, not far behind, consisted of seven uniformed policemen.

Police! Whatever they were shouting about, it meant another long delay, so long that it would probably be no use starting at all, at the end of it.

The leader's huge head emerged further from the manhole, as he raised himself to his full height. He made a threatening gesture to the man on the top of the ladder, who slid abruptly down to the ground.

"Look out for the gas!" roared Guidance. "We're off!"

Inside the machine, he spoke savagely into a telephone, and signalled to Gystak, the pilot.

For the last twenty minutes the engine had been getting warmed up with electric coils, and everything was ready.

Gystak depressed a key and fired the sparking-plugs; the external-combustion engine exploded and kicked. In a moment the soaring machine was bounding over the field on its thirty-two spinning wheels, and with a good hundred yards to spare, the heavy load lifted off the ground. It bounced once, and the smack of the shock-absorbers reverberated over the ground like a rifle.

Seven cursing policemen were left standing in the middle of the flying field.

Very slowly the machine climbed, and Gystak banked and curved gently to the left. He dared not curve too fast, or the machine was likely to stall—she stalled savagely at a hundred and fifty miles an hour, and needed a quarter mile drop to recover. This might be unpleasant if one was less than a quarter of a mile high.

When there was a gulf of two thousand feet between No. III and all the turbulence and confusion of the

Tempelhof Aerodrome, the ventilation motors were set going, and the passengers nervously adjusted their landing suits. These suits were used for any sudden accelerations or shocks, and included a three-inch thickness of soft padding, and a large crash helmet.

From loud-speakers all over the vessel came the usual warning words.

“Take care ! Take care ! We are about to kick !”

Gystak dived, to gain speed, then pulled the nose right up to the zenith. At the precise moment, he fired the fuel mixture in the main combustion chamber. There was a frightful roar, and a giant hammer seemed to strike the machine.

The soarer shot into the heavens, like an inverted meteorite.

PART III

CHAPTER VIII

TRANSIT

AT the moment of firing, there were five people lying on the well-sprung couches in the central observation-room ; this room was in the centre of the soarer and had windows in both sides. Views fore and aft could be obtained from small chambers at the front and rear.

Other rooms in the soarer were not so big, nor so well furnished ; in some of them there was an ingenious couch which could be used from any side ; it was suspended across the centre of the room, and was shaped like a large square axle. In one of the smaller rooms there was a weighted chair, swinging on an axle which automatically assumed the right position for comfortable sitting.

In each of the rooms there was a metal ladder running over the floor, up the walls, and across the ceiling, in case anyone should suddenly find himself stranded on a wall when a change occurred. All over there were straps and projecting pegs for use when the combustion chambers were shut off, and everything became weightless.

The five men in the observation-room were Hergesheimer and Dickens, Grindin, Hesker, and Dr. Nacht.

Grindin had to be helped into his landing-suit,

and forcibly laid out on a couch ; he was dozing off into a drunken sleep, now and then disturbed by violent hiccups, brought on by the shock of the first explosion.

The others, except Hergesheimer, who was too fat to recover straight away, rose from the couches, gasping painfully, and looked through the windows. The rather high acceleration made them walk heavily, and they were glad to take off their thick landing-suits.

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Dickens. "I wonder what the police wanted? Mr. Guidance certainly took some responsibility on himself when he gave the order to take-off."

"Not half so much responsibility as if I had waited," said a voice from the doorway. The leader had just entered. "You know very well that any further delay was out of the question."

Dickens remarked that he was very sorry he had spoken, and that Guidance was of course quite right.

"All the same," continued Guidance, "does anyone here know what brought the police?"

No one answered, and Guidance moved to a window.

Hergesheimer, still seated, picked up the paper he had bought and began to read, while Dickens bent over Grindin, who had now passed into slumber.

"Do you see this?" said Hergesheimer, rustling the paper. "That thief Jonathan Gorstein has pulled off another big robbery, and vanished without a trace."

"The police might be better occupied by chasing him rather than interfering with us," remarked Dr. Nacht.

"Forget the police," said Guidance, with a movement of irritation. "This is a great occasion, and we must do justice to it!"

Usually people were rather restrained in the presence of Henry Guidance; he did not often approve of humour, especially boisterous humour, and he was always slow in grasping subtle wit.

On this occasion, however, he appeared to think a little hilarity would not be out of place; he aroused exclamations on all sides by opening a cupboard and displaying half a dozen bottles.

"Scotch whiskey!" he said. "We will celebrate the start, but do not drink too much; this has to last till we get back."

Hergesheimer was pleased; he undid the safety strap and stood up eagerly. He was breathing heavily, but everyone was gasping somewhat.

Glasses were passed round, and they drank to the success of the flight.

The noise of the clinking glasses roused the Frenchman from his dreams, and he suddenly sat upright.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Hesker, slapping him on the back. "Well, Grindin, we're three hundred kilometres into the skies now!"

The Parisian turned pale, and seemed to become sober at once.

"What!" he cried. "Have we started?"

"Hell! We're nearly there!"

The Frenchman looked as if someone had just struck him a blow on the head.

"Give me some whiskey," he begged.

The others thought his peculiar behaviour was the effect of the speed.

While Henry Guidance was silently drinking, he made a mental tour of his Soaring Rocket No. III ; he pictured Herr Otto Lieben in the engine-room, tending his remarkable engine, with his two mechanics and the relief pilot. Alfred Smith in the navigation-room, his eye to a telescope and his finger on a stellar chart ; and lastly the nimble Gystak at the controls, the brain-cell of the ship.

His thoughts glowed with a warm pride ; he looked at the five men before him—all these were with him, on an expedition he had organised, in a ship he had built, for the noble cause of science ! All had one pure intention, to add to human knowledge. He was the leader, the source of this concerted effort ! He felt the harmonious atmosphere of the vessel, the undercurrent of kinship which flowed to the outermost bolt and rivet in the hull.

Suddenly he opened his eyes wide, as if seeing an inspiring vision, and drew the attention of his companions, as an eager youthful expression appeared on his face. He was standing by the window, looking intently down across a level bank of clouds.

“ Look, gentlemen, Arion is rising in the north-east. This is a great moment ! Hitherto, we have only been able to explore the moon, a lifeless world, but now who shall say that Arion may not be inhabited ? When we pierce those blue mists, who shall say what wonderful civilisations we may find ? Lastly, who shall say we may not solve the secrets which have puzzled us the last seven weeks, the secret of its origin, and of the miracle which saved the earth ? Gentlemen, let us drink again to the mystery of the planet from nowhere ! ”

"Arion!"

Hergesheimer was already drinking a second glass, but he hastily finished it off, and had it filled once more.

Hesker drank his slowly, and gazed across the wonderful expanse of white cloud. The monstrous blue crescent could just be seen through the haze.

"Titanus," he said quietly. "I wish we were there!"

The whiskey seemed to make Dr. Nacht rather pessimistic.

"It's a very low chance that Arion will be inhabited," he said.

"Why?" demanded Hergesheimer, who was sitting down again, glancing at the newspaper.

"Well, suppose, by some remarkable circumstance, that life as we know it is existing on another planet at this present moment, it would be a remarkable problem to show why the only two inhabited planets should pass so amazingly close to one another, as Arion and the earth are doing now."

"But the chances would be less remote," retorted Guidance, "if there were four or five inhabited planets, which is not impossible."

"Very unlikely! Then, we might find it impossible for us to live on Arion."

The New Zealander, immersed in his paper, ended the discussion by laughing out loud.

"Well, well," he said, waving the paper. "I see that the Gräfin von Freiburg has lost her famous necklace! What a song she's making about it! She's stirring up half the police of Europe. I say," he continued, "isn't Lieben's daughter her secretary?"

"Yes," replied Guidance.

"Lieben will certainly be interested to hear of this, then."

The Parisian stood up suddenly.

"I'll go and tell him."

He seemed anxious to get away. Slipping out of the room, he made his way towards the engine-room.

The dignified Guidance glanced at the paper, then went back to the window without saying a word. He looked down at the vanishing earth, which could vaguely be seen now and then through drifting rifts in the clouds. He wondered if the roaring flames which were kicking them off the world could still be seen from Berlin. He felt the terrific urge of Lieben's engines, which would certainly blast them to Arion in record time.

He caught the thrilling sight of the blue planet emerging completely from the horizon haze. What lay behind that blue veil, he wondered. Rocks, barrenness, lifeless sea, simmering hot swamp, or something significant—intelligent life?

Who could say what incredible creations might not be found on another world? He turned round to speak to Dr. Nacht.

From a distant corridor came a faint crash, and a torrent of words. Guidance stopped, listening, and someone shouted.

Hesker opened the door and went out, but the others hesitated on the threshold.

Hesker reappeared, his cheeks blown out in dismay, and close behind came Grindin, carrying an unconscious form in his arms.

"What is this?" exclaimed Guidance.

The Frenchman seemed dazed.

"Do you see what I see," he asked, "or am I still drunk?"

"My conscience," exclaimed Dickens, "it is Fräulein Lieben!"

So it proved. Ilse Lieben, a stowaway!

They carried the girl to a couch and laid her down, then they stood around her helplessly.

"I fell over her," explained Grindin, "in the corridor."

Her face was pale, and she was bleeding at the mouth, but the leader looked down at her grimly.

"I know someone who won't be very pleased to hear of this," he said slowly.

They knew that he meant the engineer, and they realised now why Herr Lieben had been so abrupt and put out, after he had run across the aerodrome to the soarer—he had wanted to say goodbye to his daughter, and he was annoyed at her lack of feeling because he could not find her anywhere.

Probably this explained the presence of the weeping Gersche at the take-off.

As they stood around the unconscious Ilse, they wondered what had made her come on such a dangerous voyage. This incident had the effect of making them all realise just how recklessly they were flinging themselves into the absolutely unknown perils of the blue planet.

When the girl recovered her senses, only Guidance, Hergesheimer, and Grindin were present. Dr. Nacht said that she had only jarred herself through not being

properly prepared for the shock of starting, and the only damage was a cut on the lip.

She sat up and put her hand to her mouth.

"*Und jetzt, gnädiges Fräulein,*" said Guidance ironically, "how do you feel?"

"*Fähig, danke.*"

"*Sehr wohl! Noch etwas Branntwein?*"

"*Bitte schön.*"

"Well, then, you just can't have any more whiskey! You are a stowaway, and I shall treat you as such. Do you realise that, because of your extra weight, I have had to throw several luxuries overboard? Now there is only one bottle of whiskey left!"

"What," cried Hergesheimer, "all that beautiful cupboardful gone!"

"Wasted in space! Irrevocably spilt!"

"Then, Miss Lieben, you have a lot to answer for."

"On the contrary, you must be joking. You know very well that the two drums of fuel which exploded would make up for me, and much more besides."

Guidance coughed and spoke quickly.

"How did you get into the soarer?"

"It was easy to slip in when the *Schutzleute* were pushing back the crowd, and everything was confused owing to the fire. I felt such a tremendous urge to join your expedition, Mr. Guidance—it seemed such a glorious adventure!"

Mr. Guidance was a little put out at this compliment.

"Besides, I hated the idea of being separated from my father."

"Yes, yes, and won't your father be overjoyed when he hears how you have honoured us with your presence!"

"Well, won't he?"

"My word, Miss Lieben, I don't think you realise what kind of a trip this is. This is not a tourist trip to the moon—we are doing something that never has been done before! God knows what we shall find when we reach Arion. Everyone on this ship will have to endure unimaginable perils and hardships. In comparison, the polar pioneers were on summer vacations. All this is assuming that we get there. Why, we'll probably blow up before we reach within a hundred thousand kilometres——"

"I know all that! Anyway, I'm here now, and unless you throw me outside, like you did the whiskey ——"

"These women, they are the curse of the world! Have they no sense? For a mere whim, my expedition will be ruined. Nine stone of useless weight!"

"Not so useless!"

Miss Lieben had spent much time in a gymnasium. She sprang from the couch, seized Hergesheimer under the arm-pits, and flung him over her shoulder. He lay gasping and amazed on the floor.

"Now, you see, I am capable of taking a place in your crew."

Mr. Guidance backed towards the ladder, while Grindin looked on admiringly, if a little startled.

Owing to the gallant pleading of Hergesheimer, and the earnest pleading of Grindin, Guidance decided to treat the stowaway leniently. Further reflection convinced him that there was nothing else to be done; in the confined space of the soarer everything must work in harmony; there was no room for a prisoner.

Indeed, Miss Lieben proved herself the better of

many of them, in matters of skill and endurance. Herr Lieben was horrified at the idea of his daughter coming on such a dangerous flight, and begged Guidance to turn back ; but he refused, and rightly. Might not this opportunity be unique? There could be no turning back now.

Because of her secretarial training, the day-by-day writing-up of the account of the voyage was entrusted to Miss Lieben, while Guidance himself attended to the more formal ship's log.

It was only an hour or so after this had been settled that the leader received a telephone call from the engine-room.

"Mr. Guidance, would you mind coming along here at once, if you can manage it?"

"Certainly, Herr Lieben, I'll come right along."

Guidance sighed. Was the engineer going to plead still further for him to turn back for Ilse's sake? He should know quite well that the thing was impossible.

He strode through the corridors, fully prepared to spend half an hour in arguing. But it was not about Ilse that Otto Lieben wished to speak ; he realised now that it was no use pestering Guidance to turn back ; he also realised that he should never have expected him to do such a thing.

Instead, when the leader arrived at the engine-room, the engineer spoke in a quiet voice.

"Oh, Mr. Guidance, would you just look over these figures?"

"What's the matter? My God, your engine isn't misfiring, is it?"

"*What?* Goodness no, certainly not."

"All right, I beg your pardon. But don't these

figures show that we are not going as fast as we should ? ”

“ Precisely. Yet I assure you that the engine is working normally. Weren’t *two* drums of fuel destroyed in the fire ? ”

“ Two drums, yes. ”

“ That is to say, three hundred and fifteen pounds, isn’t it ? ”

“ That’s right. ”

“ Well, then, allow a hundred and thirty pounds, at the very outside, for my daughter and her clothes—that means we are one hundred and eighty-five pounds underweight, approximately. Yet these acceleration figures give only fifty pounds underweight. ”

“ Exactly ! ”

“ Then, there’s well over a hundred pounds not accounted for. ”

“ Can we have made a mistake in the weighing of the fuel and the provisions ? ”

“ I cannot believe that ! Smith and I went over every single item most carefully. ”

Guidance and Lieben stood looking at each other for a moment.

“ How do you account then for the discrepancy ? ”

“ Herr Lieben, there is another stowaway on board ! ”

The leader’s face hardened in anger. Suddenly stirring himself, he flung a switch, and alarm-bells rang all over the ship. Then he ran back along the corridors to the central observation-room, and waited impatiently for the company to gather.

As soon as Ilse appeared, he spoke to her in a severe voice.

"Miss Lieben, when you hid yourself on board, did you bring with you any heavy parcel of any kind?"

"No, I only had a light raincoat, and goloshes."

"Thank you." By now, everyone had arrived, and he turned round to look at them. "Has anyone brought extra luggage that we have not listed?"

There came a chorus of negation.

"Well then, I want every one to make a thorough search, everywhere! There is something on this vessel that should not be here, and it weighs over a hundred pounds. It should not be hard to see!"

"What——" began Dr. Nacht.

"To put it clearly, we have a second stowaway on board, who has not been discovered yet!"

The startled hearers had no time for discussion; urged vigorously by Guidance, the party disbanded, in some confusion and no little excitement.

Who could it be? All parts of the soaring machine were filled with chattering and shouting searchers. The owner of that hundred pounds had to be found!

Some curious things came to light in the next few minutes. Among other discoveries, a large bottle of Spanish port was found under the bedding of Mr. Hergesheimer's bunk; *that* accounted for a pound and a half, at any rate.

But Guidance was in no mood for worrying over little things.

"Ah," remarked Paul Grindin sarcastically to Dickens, "if everyone has a few things like that, we shall soon make up a hundred pounds!"

Dickens was about to reply when a loud shout echoed through the soarer. Unmistakably it was the voice of Hesker, the Czech:

"Here he is ! Hi, everybody, I've got him !"

There was the sound of a scuffle and a fall. They began running towards the noise, which appeared to be coming from the cook's quarters.

The first to arrive pounced on two men, whom they saw struggling on the floor ; one of the men was Hesker, and he got up, panting, and slapped the dust from his coat. The other man was the second stow-away.

"I found him," gasped Hesker, "hiding in the store-room behind the kitchen."

The stowaway stood meekly and calmly against the wall, and met the curious gaze of his captors with a steady look. No one could remember having seen him before. All stood watching him, noticing his fine Celtic head, with its slightly hooked nose, fair hair, and the faintly-burning deep eyes of a mystic. He held himself straight, but was slightly shorter than the average in height.

That indefinite moment of curious contemplation was broken by the sound of a heavy tread. It was Henry Guidance, and he was fuming.

He strode forward, but stopped to watch the stow-away.

"Who the blazes are you ?" he shouted, but the man did not take any notice. Guidance grasped his shoulder roughly. "Come," he said, "tell me your name."

The man shook himself free, and the spectators felt a curious thrill.

"I have no name," he said simply.

The leader felt an impulse he could not explain ; to the surprise of the onlookers, he fell back ; nor did

he pursue his enquiry further, at least so far as the name of the unknown man was concerned.

Guidance spoke again as if by an effort.

"Well, Mr. Nameless, you might tell us for what reason you chose to hide yourself aboard this soarer?"

The stowaway smiled, and replied coolly.

"Scientific curiosity, Mr. Guidance. I may as well tell you straight away that I do not intend to disclose anything else."

The leader stepped up to him once more.

"Sir, if it were not for the fact that we are two drums of fuel underweight, I would have you thrown outside!"

Then he turned and strode away, unable to contain himself any longer.

Indeed, no one could blame Henry Guidance for being enraged. Two stowaways meant a great deal on such a trip, where every pound of food had to be tabulated. There was one thing certain—Guidance would make "Mr. Nameless," whoever he was, work hard for his passage.

"Well," said Hesker, to "Nameless," "you certainly gave me a nice little scramble, and you've put Guidance in a temper all right. You'd better look out for yourself the rest of this trip. You'll get all the dirtiest jobs to do, mark my word, and let me tell you your first dirty job, Mr. Nameless. You can just brush down the back of my jacket for me! I'm sure it will be marked after rolling about on the floor. Come on now!"

The stowaway smiled.

"Please turn round, Mr. —"

"Hesker is my name."

"Please turn round, Mr. Hesker," repeated the

stranger politely, and he slapped him vigorously on the back.

"Whoa, whoa, Mr. Nameless, that's quite enough ! There can't be a spot of dust left now ! By the way you are banging me, it looks as if you think we are still fighting."

"I'm sure it is an honour," said Nameless, "to slap the back of the famous astronomer who was the first to discover Arion ! However, your coat is perfectly clean now, so I'll stop. By the way," he added, addressing himself to the other passengers, who were still standing curiously around, "it is not the slightest use hanging round here. I am not going to divulge my name, or any of the dramatic reasons why I fled from home and stowed myself away aboard this ship."

His manner was so cool and insolent that most of them turned away disgusted, except Grindin and Hergesheimer.

"Now you've put them all in a huff," exclaimed Hesker, who was pulling his coat round and twisting his head over his shoulder to see if the cloth was really clean.

"Even though you have performed the remarkable feat of hiding away like a rat," said Hergesheimer indignantly, "that doesn't give you the right to speak in an uncivil manner."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hergesheimer," replied Nameless, bowing stiffly, "for that is your name, I know. No one could forget it after seeing your photograph in the *Münchner Illustrierte Presse*. I did not mean to give offence to the man who saved the reason of the world. By the way, sir, why did they choose you to come on this flight, when your size is equal to that of

two ordinary men, who could perform your useful functions doubly well?"

"At least I *was* chosen, Mr. Nameless—I didn't come unasked! I did not conceal myself like a criminal, and make myself a nuisance."

"I don't see how you could have concealed yourself, Mr. Hergesheimer, when you're so big."

Hergesheimer swung angrily away, and walked down the corridor.

"Well, it looks as if you're going to cause some stir on this ship, Mr. Nameless," remarked the Parisian, smiling. "Whatever else may happen, we shan't suffer from boredom, at any rate."

"How are we going to fix you up?" said Hesker thoughtfully. "It's certainly not a very comfortable place where you've been hiding yourself."

"There's plenty of space under my bunk," began the Frenchman courteously. He would not have been discourteous, even if Nameless had knocked him on the head, as well as insulted him.

"No," interrupted the Czech, "he'll sleep under my bunk, if you please. Wasn't I the one who found him?"

"Certainly you were," murmured Nameless grimly, rubbing a slight bruise on his elbow.

"Come on then! Let's find some cushions somewhere."

"What!" exclaimed Nameless, astonished. "Do you mean to tell me that they have such things as cushions on a pioneering expedition like this?"

"Why not? Explorers may have been stoics and indulged in hardships before 1990, but not now! Why, I wouldn't be at all surprised if we found a

hammock or two, if we searched long enough. Come along ! ”

At a bend in the corridor, they came across Ilse Lieben.

“ Oh, M. Grindin,” she said, in her best French, “ I’ve been trying to look at the earth through the stern telescope, but I can’t get it focused right. Won’t you come and help me, please ? ”

“ Why, of course, Miss Ilse.”

The two went off, and Hesker and Nameless were left alone.

“ Who on earth is that, Mr. Hesker ? I didn’t know there were any women visiting Arion.”

“ Oh, she’s another stowaway ! What do you think of that ? You aren’t the only one by any means who has put Guidance into a rage. You should have heard him when she was found ! You can’t wonder at him being angry when you turned up. She was knocked senseless by the shock of the take-off, and Grindin—that’s the fellow who is with her now—fell over her as she was lying in a passage. He was drunk at the time, and could hardly believe his eyes—nor could we, for that matter. She is the daughter of the old engineer, Otto Lieben.”

“ What, in heaven’s name, did she come on this excursion for ? ”

“ How do you think I know ? She said it was curiosity and adventure, and all that, but when women say something, they might mean anything. Take my word for it, she had some secret urge, and a strong one too, to make her come. By the way, what made you come aboard, if I may ask ? ”

If Hesker thought he could catch Nameless in a

mood of confidence, and surprise his secret from him, he was mistaken.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Oh, come, I won't tell anybody. You needn't worry about that. Now if you were to give me your confidence, I could tell you one or two funny things about this ship. What d'you say, Mr. Nameless? What's your name, anyhow? Surely you can tell me that."

"I'm afraid not."

"Mr. Nameless, if you only knew what queer things are going on in this soarer, you'd be surprised!"

"What things?"

"Tell me your name, and what you're doing here, and the secrets are yours. That's fair."

"No."

Hesker refused to get annoyed.

"Well, then, let's forget it. Ah, here's a cushion or two for you, and I believe there's a blanket somewhere. Not that it's really necessary, you know, with the temperature inside as high as it is."

"Indeed, it is uncomfortably warm."

"That's the idea of our Mr. Guidance, of course. You see, he has spent much of his life in India, and he insists on heat whenever possible. When he's in a house you can never get near the fire. Until someone sends in a definite complaint, the temperature will stay up as it is. Poor fat Hergesheimer is feeling it most, I think. That's because he's from New Zealand, you know."

Hesker was by no means the only person who attempted to plumb the depths of the stowaway's secret, but no one was successful. Even the most

persevering passengers failed to get the slightest information from the Celtic-looking stranger; he caused more exasperation and annoyance than even the most trying incident of the journey. Guidance was so furious that he hardly spoke to him at all.

CHAPTER IX

ARRIVAL

THERE was a day-side and a night-side to the soarer—the first being turned to the sun, the second away from it. But it was arranged to call “night” that period during which most of the passengers were asleep.

During the first of these nights, those who were lucky enough to sleep on the night-side merely had to turn off the lights ; but those on the day-side had also to obscure the windows before they could obtain darkness.

A mechanic remained awake to guard against outbreaks of fire, or other mishaps. The relief-pilot took Gystak's place ; the other mechanic that of Mr. Guidance.

Hergesheimer's assistant, Mr. Dickens, had secretly brought something with him to relieve the gloom, which, for a reason known only to himself and one other person in the world, almost continually possessed him. It was a large flagon of 1980 claret, a kind which was pure alcohol for all practical purposes, with a kick like a horse. He drank a little of it before entering his bunk.

It was not sufficient to make him drunk, but enough to sharpen his wits and keep him wide-awake.

After lying for some minutes looking at the brilliant

stars in the jet-black sky, for he was on the night side of the ship, he decided to get up and walk along the corridor to the central observation-room.

Slipping on a pair of shoes, he went outside, and was surprised to see a streak of light at a far angle of the corridor.

"I wonder what's going on there? I thought everybody would be in bed long ago, and the night-guard is at the back of the ship."

He walked quietly to the corner, and discovered that the source of the light was the far end, apparently in Lieben's engine-room. Puzzled, he made his way to the half-open door, and looked inside. He saw Otto Lieben seated at a table, eating a biscuit and glancing through an old copy of *The Weekly Rocketeer*.

"Hello, Mr Dickens, what are you doing up at this time of the night? Have you heard it, too?"

"Heard what? I happened to see the light coming from your room, so I came along to see if anything was the matter."

The claret had put Mr. Dickens into a loquacious mood; he came right in and sat down on a seat which was firmly screwed to the wall.

"What, do you mean to say you haven't heard it? I can't understand why everyone isn't prowling round. I simply can't get to sleep."

"What have you heard, Herr Lieben? All I've heard to-night is Mr. Hergesheimer snoring, and that beastly whirring of the ventilator fans."

The engineer offered Dickens a chocolate biscuit, but he refused.

"I'm really staying up, Mr. Dickens, because I have a feeling—you see this drawer?"

"In the desk?"

"Yes. Well, when I came in here half an hour ago, I found signs that made it look as if someone had been interfering with the lock. There were some marks, or scratches on it, which I don't think were there before."

"Indeed—is there anything valuable in the drawer?"

"Valuable! I should say so. The plans of my engine, and also the composition of the special fuel for it, is locked up in there, Mr. Dickens. Valuable!"

"Well, hadn't you better tell Mr. Guidance?"

"I shall if anything like this happens again. Whoever it was must have heard me coming, and hurried away before he could get it open. There's nothing disturbed inside."

"Any idea who it could be?"

"I certainly have."

"Who, then?"

"Why—well, I don't like to say, in case it isn't, you know. It would hardly be wise—but if I catch him at it, you'll see then!"

"You said you heard a noise, didn't you? Was it this man you heard, then?"

"Couldn't say, but I don't think so. It's a queer kind of noise I've been hearing, off and on, for some time. I've had a walk round the ship, but I couldn't see anything wrong anywhere. If you'll just sit still a moment, you're bound to hear it. There it is! Do you hear?"

"Why, yes! That's a queer sound! What on earth. . . ."

"It sounds as if it is coming from the cook's room,

doesn't it? Well, when you get down there, it stops altogether. There's simply nothing there, I tell you. No room for anyone to hide. I even looked in that place where they found the stowaway."

"I can't imagine what can be making that noise. There must be someone there. Come on, let's go down and try to find it."

Lieben and Dickens made their way in the direction of the sound, stopping at intervals to listen, in an attempt to locate it. Arrived there, though they searched everywhere where a man could possibly hide, they found nothing.

"There you are," said the engineer, in a serious tone. "There's something decidedly queer about this ship. Nothing you can see here, certainly. But I'm not going to bed while I can still hear those sounds."

"It seems to have stopped now."

"Yes, but as soon as we move away from here, it will start again."

"It's ghostly," laughed Dickens. "Fancy, if this ship's haunted! A haunted house is nothing; you can always walk out of it. But a haunted soarer in space! We can't walk out here—we are imprisoned in a wall of absolute zero."

"Don't talk like that, Mr. Dickens!"

"Who knows! Perhaps *revenants* find it easier to manifest themselves outside the earth's atmosphere, away from human surroundings. Do you ever realise just how absolutely still, and deathly silent, outer space really is? It's just the right conditions! Why, anything may happen out here."

"Not so loud, Mr. Dickens, or you'll waken everyone up."

"Sounds as if I have awakened someone—who's that shouting?"

The voice was coming from a short branching corridor near at hand. They went down it, and perceived Hesker, his hair disordered, rubbing his eyes and peering from an open doorway.

"Hello, what's happening out here? Can't you let people get to sleep?" he asked.

"Quiet, Mr. Hesker. Have we disturbed the others as well?"

Hesker's bunk was in the same room as those of Nacht, Grindin, and Smith.

"No, they're sound asleep. But what's up?"

"There's a curious sound coming from somewhere, and we can't find out where it is. Will you help us look for it?"

Hesker, grumbling a little, put on some shoes and a coat, and joined the other two. But after a few minutes they had exhausted the possibilities, and there was still no sign of anything.

"Nothing here," grumbled the Czech. "This isn't a joke, is it?"

"Certainly not. However, we shall have to give up, I suppose, and it's no use arousing everyone for a harmless squeak or two, whatever it is. I don't see how it can be anything serious; but keep your ears open, will you, Mr. Hesker, and see if you can hear it as well? Mr. Lieben says the sound starts when there is no one there, but stops as soon as you try to find it."

"I'll do nothing of the kind—I've lost enough sleep as it is. You two can listen if you like, but I won't."

Hesker, still grumbling, went back to his room and opened the door.

"Good heavens, come here quickly!" he exclaimed. "Nameless, the stowaway, has gone! He was sleeping under my bunk."

Dickens and Lieben entered the room with some excitement. Hesker shook Dr. Nacht, who was occupying the next bunk.

"Dr. Nacht, have you heard anything at all while I've been out? Did you hear the stowaway move?"

"What's that?" muttered Nacht drowsily. "I've heard nothing at all, Mr. Hesker, and I wish to goodness you'd wait till the morning before waking me up."

He turned over and went to sleep again.

"It must have been Nameless who was making that noise we heard," said the engineer.

"That's not possible," exclaimed Dickens. "There's not enough room for anyone to hide where we've been looking."

"Well, where on earth has the stowaway gone? We'd better find him, and see what he's up to. Shall I wake Mr. Guidance?"

"No," said Hesker, "I wouldn't, not yet. Let's search for Nameless first. We don't want to disturb Mr. Guidance's sleep if we can possibly help it."

Walking as quietly as they could, Hesker, Dickens, and Lieben went further along the side-corridor, and re-entered the main corridor, proceeding towards the front of the vessel. After some searching, they returned without success, very puzzled.

"That's remarkable," said Hesker, in a weary tone. "Nameless has vanished into thin air. I'm fed up! I'm going back to bed,"

He opened the door of his room and went in, then the others heard a cry of astonishment.

"I say," he shouted, "come in here! The stowaway is under my bunk, asleep!"

Lieben and Dickens went in, and saw Nameless lying where he should have been, apparently unconscious. Evidently he must have slipped in from the other end of the corridor while they were searching the front portions of the soarer, and he was now pretending to be asleep. Lieben shook him roughly, and he awoke, with every appearance of having been asleep.

"Tell us where you've been, wandering round in the middle of the night!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Don't tell me you were lying here ten minutes ago!"

"I assure you, gentlemen, I've been fast asleep since I retired. What is the matter?"

"It's no use denying it—we were in here a few minutes ago, and you certainly were not here then!"

"Gentlemen, I am sorry to say you must all be drunk. Either that, or I am a somnambulist."

"But——"

No matter how much they protested and argued, Nameless stubbornly refused to confess that, consciously, he had moved from his bed that night. They continued to argue, grew hot, called each other names. The noise threatened to awaken the other passengers.

Suddenly Hesker interrupted them, with a quick movement of his hand.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "Listen!"

"There's that sound again," said Dickens.

They dashed out and down the corridor, but no one was there.

"It could not have been Nameless who caused it then."

"Oh, forget it ! I'm sick of this. I'm going to get some sleep, if that's possible aboard this ship. We'll tell Mr. Guidance all about it to-morrow."

Hesker and Dickens made their way to their bunks, but Herr Lieben passed a sleepless night, guarding his plans.

In the morning the weary engineer went to Mr. Guidance, and informed him of the events of the previous night.

Guidance was seated alone in the navigation-room, with a slide-rule in his hand.

"*Gott grüßen dich !*" he said, smiling. "You look very tired this morning, Herr Lieben. Didn't you sleep well ?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't sleep at all."

"Indeed !"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't even go to bed. I was up all night, Mr. Guidance, watching over the designs of my engine. I found marks on the lock of my drawer, which showed that someone had been trying to open it. Moreover, during the night, as I sat there blowing smoke-rings, Mr. Dickens, Mr. Hesker, and I, heard suspicious sounds coming from the kitchen-end of the ship ; we searched everywhere, but we couldn't find anything to cause it. Believe me, Mr. Guidance, everything isn't right by any means with the *Soaring Rocket No. III.*"

The leader was astonished. For some moments he sat, idly pushing his slide-rule in and out.

"What kind of a sound?" he asked at last. "Just what did you hear, Herr Lieben?"

"Well, it's rather difficult to describe. It was very faint, and only audible at intervals—it was a kind of burbling, you know, and every time we sought it, it stopped, and there was nothing to be seen."

"Bubbling, did you say, and very faint?"

"That's it."

"Thank you for this information, Herr Lieben. Now, who did you say were with you?"

"Mr. Hesker and Mr. Dickens."

"Would you mind asking Mr. Dickens to step up here and see me?"

After the engineer had found Mr. Dickens, and sent him to the navigation room, Guidance questioned the astronomer.

"Now, Mr. Dickens, about this queer sound you heard last night—can you tell me exactly what it was like?"

"Certainly. It was a sort of low squeaking, with an occasional gasp or sigh."

"Very loud?"

"No. In fact, I could only just hear it."

"Thanks very much. Will you find Mr. Hesker and tell him to come up, please?"

A few minutes later Mr. Hesker appeared, partially dressed, and rubbing his eyes. He said:

"Good morning, Mr. Guidance. I heard that you wanted me. Mr. Dickens had just dragged me from my bunk—I overslept after the excitement last night."

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Hesker, but I wanted to ask you something about that sound you seem to have heard last night. Could you describe what sort of noise it was?"

"Why, it was just like someone with a deep-pitched voice, laughing very soft and low, but at times the pitch seemed to be higher—a harsh gasping kind of noise, which I can hardly describe. Not loud at all. We could only hear it when we stood quite still."

"That's all I want to know, Mr. Hesker. Now, do you happen to know where Mr. Dickens and Herr Lieben have gone?"

"I left them talking together in Smoking-Room Number Two."

"Right. We'll just walk along there and see if we can find them."

Hesker, rather puzzled, led the way to the smoking-room, which was one of four scattered about the soarer. They were small cosy rooms, with the interior entirely metal, and therefore non-inflammable. Dickens and Lieben were smoking cigars, and stood up in some surprise when Hesker and Guidance appeared. Guidance closed the door carefully.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said in a quiet voice. They did so, staring at him. "Well, I don't know what happened last night, and I can't guess, but this is what you tell me, in your own words. First of all, Herr Lieben observes a very faint sound, when he is very tired and in a worried frame of mind, because he is guarding his designs. This sound is elusive; when he goes near it, it fades away. He says it was a burbling sound. Then he makes Mr. Dickens very excited by

telling him about this mysterious thing—so excited, in fact, that *he* hears what *he* imagines to be a squeaking noise. After that comes our friend, Mr. Hesker, no doubt very sleepy and annoyed because he has been aroused from sleep, and what does he hear? A faint laughing or gasping, he thinks, which also eludes him when he tries to seek it. A laugh, a squeak, a burble—what kind of sound is this, which dislikes being approached, and dissolves into thin air? A sound where there is nothing living that could produce any sound!

“What do you expect me to think? This laugh, squeak, or burble, existed in the first place only in the imagination of our excellent engineer, who confesses that he was tired and in a suspicious frame of mind. Then you two heard it because you expected to hear it, and you were excited. You could only hear it when you stood perfectly still. You can imagine you can hear quite a number of things when you stand perfectly still. When you move towards it, it flits away, naturally, because there is nothing there to begin with.

“It was nothing more than an hallucination—it could not have been anything else. If I believe this, why am I wasting time arguing about it, and explaining it? For this reason . . . men who can hear things that aren’t there are in a nervous state which is by no means desirable under ordinary circumstances, and a thousand times less so in our position. We shall see plenty of queer things at the end of this voyage, without there being any need to invent them. It is most important that every one of us should have full possession of his wits. We can’t have our engineer-in-

charge and two of our astronomers going about suffering from delusions. Get a firm grip on yourselves, gentlemen ! Of course," he added, moving towards the door, "if one of you has been borrowing some of Mr. Hergesheimer's Spanish port, well——"

He went out and slammed the door.

Hesker lit a cigar, Dickens sat silent, thinking about the claret he had drunk the night before. He must have had rather more than he intended, he thought ; so much so that now he was feeling a slight headache. He wondered if that had anything to do with it.

"Mr. Guidance forgets," remarked the engineer sourly, "that the noise, whatever it was, might have changed its quality, and sounded quite different at different times. Mark my words, he'll find out one day that we really did hear something last night, and I'll be surprised if it doesn't turn out to be something serious. I drank nothing at all last night except a cup of chocolate and a glass of water."

"It seems to me," said the Czech, puffing at his cigar, "that it is Mr. Guidance himself, and not we, who is overwrought. We mustn't forget that he has a big responsibility—the safety of us all, and the welfare of the soarer, which must have cost him a good sum in Reichmarks."

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The chief pilot and Mr. Hergesheimer were seated in the curious room which had a couch in the form of a square axle, running across the centre from wall to wall, so that any side of it could be used, depending upon which way the soarer was accelerating. This room had no windows, being completely surrounded by

corridors or other rooms, so the lights had to be burning all the time it was occupied.

"Did you see much of the trouble during the—panic, down there?" asked the New Zealander, pointing with his thumb towards the back of the ship in the general direction of the receding earth.

"I should say so," exclaimed Gystak. "I'm a journalist—I mean, I *was* a journalist."

"Of course, I'd forgotten. You were on the *Stuttgart Tageblatt*, weren't you? There was no sign of any disorder at all where I was, at Mount Franklin Observatory."

"I could tell you some stories, Mr. Hergesheimer, which would make your hair stand on end. There was one fellow I knew, in Zürich, a very keen golfer. He insisted on doing two rounds of golf every day, even when he believed the world was doomed. He was always getting into bunkers. 'What's the use of having bunkers,' he would say to me, 'if you don't use them?' He was one of the hundreds who were lost when half Zürich was burnt to the ground."

"I lost a cousin in that . . ." said Hergesheimer.

"I got some wonderful pictures of the fire."

"By the way, you have a camera with you, haven't you? Why not take some shots inside the ship?"

"That's a good idea."

"It'll help to pass the time, won't it? I've been rather bored up to now, and I've grumbled several times that there aren't more magazines lying about. I don't read novels; I brought a daily paper with me, and I've read that three times. I detest cards and four-sided chess, and all other games,"

Their talk was interrupted by a deep voice from the telephone speaker.

"Having heard your very interesting conversation, gentlemen, owing to the neglect of someone who failed to disconnect the 'phone-switch, may I remark that I think your idea is a very good one! If you'll go to the central observation-room with your camera, Mr. Gystak, I'll tell everyone to collect there. As for you, Mr. Hergesheimer, in the small cupboard in the observation-room you'll find a package containing a large number of magazines and papers. If I had told you before, I'm sure that by now there would have been nothing left for you to read. You see, gentlemen, we are prepared for all emergencies. By the way, will you tell the others to be more careful in future, and to disconnect all switches when finished with? It is gross carelessness, really."

The pilot switched off the speaker, then left to prepare his camera. While he was going through the door, Hergesheimer called to him.

"What a good job that Mr. Guidance spoke up when he did! I was just going to say something extraordinarily uncomplimentary about him."

When the New Zealander arrived at the observation room, he found Gystak and the leader already there, and the others were coming in through the two entrances.

"Will you all think of something interesting to do," called out the pilot, "while I'm setting up my camera. I shan't be two minutes. Switch on all the lights, somebody."

No one could think of anything that was the least amusing, except looking out of the window through

a telescope. All Guidance could think of was an action-shot, climbing up the spiral ladder leading to the main telescope above the ceiling.

"Right you are!" shouted Gystak. "I'm turning on the motor. Just be natural."

"Don't waste more than one reel on this," warned the leader.

Grindin flapped his hand at Hergesheimer, who put down the copy of *La Vie Parisienne* in which he had been immersed, and hastily picked up *The Weekly Rocketeer*. Smith and Ilse Lieben drifted aimlessly round the room, while the engineer was trying to blow smoke-rings.

The leader went to the foot of the spiral staircase.

"Take a shot of me climbing up," he said.

Guidance laid a hand on the rail, and instantly flew up into the air, and hit his head violently on the ceiling. Everyone left the ground, and Gystak turned a complete somersault, still clutching his camera.

Herr Lieben hovered half-way between the floor and the ceiling, surrounded by an immense grey ball of tobacco-smoke, while his daughter floated slowly through the air and rebounded off a window.

Hesker was levitated in a sublime manner, and soared in company with Guidance near the ceiling. Dickens floated under a table, and collided with Smith, while Dr. Nacht was spinning round and round in the air like a roulette-wheel. Grindin was entangled with the stout Hergesheimer in the far corner.

Suddenly everyone fell slowly to the floor. They began to disentangle themselves from various articles of furniture, and Gystak anxiously inspected his camera.

Hesker and the leader descended from the ceiling simultaneously, and sprawled on the floor.

Guidance stood up and looked round at the confusion.

"What on earth is wrong with the relief pilot?" he shouted.

"What's happened?" exclaimed Lieben, who had tumbled out of the ball of tobacco-smoke.

"Oh, it just means that we're half-way to Arion, and the pilot cut off the engines for a moment. Naturally we all lost our weight, because the acceleration had stopped. Now I suppose he's turned her round the other way, and started the explosions again, to cut down our speed. But what I want to know is, why on earth didn't he warn us before cutting out? There's a special set of bells wired throughout the ship, and they should have rung. Why didn't they? I'm going to find out."

He strode angrily out of the room, and the rest began to clear up.

"What a mess!" said the New Zealander, unconcernedly picking up *La Vie Parisienne* from the floor.

"I got some great pictures," announced Gystak enthusiastically. "A fine one of Mr. Guidance cracking his head on the ceiling! It'll be a scream!"

This remark restored their good humour; some even laughed.

"I hope you'll invite us to your cinema show when we get back, Mr. Gystak! We can't miss a thing like that."

After everything had been put in order, Guidance returned.

"The pilot says he's very sorry, and he offers his

apologies to all of you for the inconvenience he has caused. But he says it wasn't really his fault, because he threw the switch for the alarm-bell quite ten minutes before he cut off the fuel. So he says there must be something wrong with the switch or the wiring. He wasn't aware of it, because you can't hear the bells from his compartment. Evidently a fault has developed somewhere. I'm setting the two mechanics on at once to get it repaired. All I can say is I'm very sorry it happened, but anyway no one has been hurt. How about those shots, Mr. Gystak? Your camera isn't damaged, I trust?"

"Not even scratched, Mr. Guidance."

"Good. Well, would you mind starting her up again, so that we can do it properly this time?"

The leader went once more to the foot of the spiral ladder.

"Ready?"

"Right."

With calm dignity, in marked contrast to his last ascent, Guidance climbed up the metal staircase and disappeared through the ceiling. Then he reappeared backwards.

"Fine," he announced. "Now, shall we have a general shot of everyone in the room? Herr Lieben, do try to make those smoke-rings you were talking about. They should be very effective and amusing. We want to suggest a comradely, convivial atmosphere."

"I don't seem able to do rings to-day," said the engineer wearily. "I've tried again and again, and I'm so full of smoke I feel like Montgolfier's balloon. Or a smoked haddock," he added,

"Hi, wait a moment!" shouted Ilse, "my hair's got disarranged through bumping against that window."

The pilot walked slowly round the room, holding his camera in various positions. Grindin waved at Hergesheimer, who, with a sigh, dropped *La Vie Parisienne*. Ilse patted her hair and sat down.

"Hello," said Gystak suddenly, "where has Mr. Hesker gone?"

The Czech was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Anyway, the reel's nearly finished."

After Gystak had taken a view of the distant earth through the window, and also of the dazzling sun through a tinted screen, he left the observation-room in order to put his camera in a safe place.

He was stopped in the corridor by Guidance, who had followed him.

"I say, Mr. Gystak," he asked, in a casual manner, "did you happen to get a shot of me that first time, when I hit the ceiling with my head?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Guidance, I got it, I believe."

"Well, don't you think it was a little—undignified?"

"I should think it would make a very amusing sequence."

"H'm! As a favour to me, Mr. Gystak, would you mind very much if you cut out that scene? Just clip it off with a pair of scissors where all that confusion occurred?"

"Well, Mr. Guidance——"

The leader made a persuasive gesture with his hands, and the chief pilot could hardly refuse.

"Certainly, Mr. Guidance, if you wish me to——"

"Thank you. It would be better, don't you think?"
The leader's dignity was satisfied.

"Wasting an excellent shot," muttered the pilot,
"for a little thing like that. He's far too dignity-conscious."

CHAPTER X

STRANGE SOIL

MEANWHILE *Soaring Rocket No. III* rapidly ate up the distance between earth and Arion. Every half-hour there was a noticeable increase in the planet's size. Soon the weird blue disc, which seemed to exercise a growing fascination over the minds of the watchers, grew plainer and plainer, till it became obviously a vast round ball. Still it grew in size, till it occupied a whole hemisphere of the heavens.

The watchers strained their eyes and directed telescopes towards it, but the blue veil remained a barrier. They stared at it for an hour without stopping, for they were intrigued. Their curiosity became intolerable.

At one time Guidance was showing Ilse how to view the blue wonder properly through a telescope, and she gasped.

"Beautiful ! Here we are hanging over this thing, poised like a bird !"

Guidance flinched at the word.

Ilse's father was still very much grieved at his daughter's presence on this dangerous trip ; he tried to console himself with the knowledge that his new external-combustion engine, after it had had a few hours warming, was giving even better results than he

had expected from the test flights. So rapid was their acceleration that, on the evening of May 31st, they were a mere thirty thousand miles from the blue planet; they had been decelerating now for some time.

Arion drew closer, but at a waning pace. Soon they were so close that they began to look out for signs of an atmosphere.

Arion became concave, a beautiful blue saucer, and they were dropping soundlessly into the middle of it. Those silent watchful hours became ecstatic; the calm blueness was soothing to the eyes, a sedative.

The steady imperceptible approach, and the vast vivid monotone of colour, filled their minds with strange thoughts. They almost felt that, at moment, the blue curtain might part and reveal ~~some~~ holy mystery. They felt as if they were violating a divine sanctuary, and were never free from a sense of wonder and awe.

For hours they dropped towards the very centre of the saucer. All sense of danger departed; they only had to look at Arion's smooth radiance, and they were reassured.

Then came a change,—when the miles could be counted in hundreds, the blueness slowly became fainter and vaguer. As they hovered over the immense mist, Dickens spoke his thoughts.

“Well, there should be a race of saints down there.”

“Why?”

“Well, colours are supposed to have psychological effects—yellow for cheerfulness, green for tranquillity, red for passion, and so on. Blue stands for holiness.”

The blueness became so vague and diffuse that they

realised they would soon be surrounded by it. They were already well into the atmosphere, and shortly they began to glide in the manner of an aeroplane.

There was a hushed expectancy ; they did not talk much, but watched and waited. In a very short time their waiting would be over, and their curiosity partially satisfied. As the strange mental effect of the blue below them gradually wore off, their calmness disappeared, and excitement once more obtained a hold. Now that the wings could grip the atmosphere, they had a feeling that they were really on the planet at last.

But they were faced with the first grave danger—the mist itself. It would take some courage to plunge into the unknown blindness below them, to grope towards unknown territory with a machine which needed the best of landing-grounds. They were not even sure that there was solid land below the mist, and if there were, that it could be landed upon in safety.

Before descending any further, the leader went to the pilot's room and had a brief talk with Gystak, who was quick and alert after a six-hour rest. Then he made his way to the observation-room and spoke into a microphone, and his voice was carried to all parts of the vessel :

“ Pay attention, please ! Every one of you, prepare for landing at once. Don landing-suits and strap yourselves securely in seats. Rest as limply as possible. The landing will possibly be of a more violent nature than the take-off. Those who wear spectacles should remove them. Do not delay—you have three minutes in which to prepare.”

Vision began to be obscured. The passengers eagerly crowded the windows for a glimpse, before securing themselves. What mysteries of existence might not be revealed? The strange problem of Arion itself!

An instant before the vision was finally obscured, Dr. Nacht exclaimed, and struck the glass.

"What did you see?" asked the leader in alarm.

Dr. Nacht rubbed his eyes and blinked.

"Höchst erstaunlich! Merkwürdig! Sehr Wunderbar!"

"What's wrong with him?"

"I am blinded! I cannot see!"

Nacht sat down and held his head. His companions looked on, not knowing what to do. After a moment he seemed all right, and stood up.

"Mr. Guidance, just before we plunged, a most astonishing thing caught my eye—a most brilliant flash of light, on the east horizon! Not large, but strong—how it shone!"

This information caused much surprise, but it was decided to carry straight on, as no time was to be lost; moreover, no one else had seen the remarkable flash.

Now came the most difficult stage of the flight; visibility was no more than twenty-five yards, and at any moment, while the soarer glided down through the atmosphere, the side of a mountain or a cliff might be encountered.

Assuming that solid ground was below them, they could not see to make a landing. Guidance had a valuable instrument which would safeguard them to some extent; this was an echo-sounding apparatus, on the same principle as the echo-pro prospector. A beam

of ultra-sonic high-frequency sound-waves was projected downwards, and the reflection was picked up by microphone ; an estimate of the height could then be obtained.

He checked the device by another one, using Langevin's piezo-electric quartz resonator. This had been used seventy-seven years before, in the Zeppelins, and to ascertain the depth of the ocean. It was necessary, however, to obtain a sample of the atmosphere, and discover the velocity of sound, a simple matter.

While doing so, he found to his great relief that the air was quite breathable, although there was much water-vapour present, which would make it oppressive and close.

The soarer descended steadily in gliding flight, at an altitude of thirty thousand metres.

Henry Guidance scribbled in his note-book in the front observation-chamber.

" Every two minutes we take a reading on the echosounder, also the barometer. Our ears are playing tricks now that the external-combustion engine is silent. Occasionally we direct a supersonic beam forward, to guard against obstructions.

" Twenty thousand metres. Visibility nil. The extent of this mist causes me anxiety. What lies below—sea or land, mountain or plain? No sounds have reached us from the depths.

" Fifteen thousand metres. Visibility as before. We have struck a bad patch ; the air is very disturbed and bumpy. Once we dropped three hundred metres in an air pocket ; it was nearly too much for Hergesheimer (fat) ; still, he passed the medical. That

Miss Lieben rides through them all without a murmur; I don't think it would trouble her if we stalled and fell into a spin.

"What a mess! A gust suddenly elevated the starboard wing, and I have spilt some coffee on my best shirt.

"Ten thousand metres. Not a thing can we see.

"Intense excitement! A most violent explosion has deafened us, but where it comes from, we do not know. The concussion lifted the soarer a thousand feet into the air. I cannot imagine how Gystak kept control. Have they artillery on Arion? It would be a perfect world if there was no artillery!

"How careful we must be. No one can guess what may happen next.

"Five thousand metres. Blue mist.

"Four thousand. The cloud is thinning.

"We are through! The landscape of Arion lies before our eyes! We cannot look enough; we gaze down hungrily. It is strange. The illumination is better than we had thought; considerably better than twilight.

"What a magnificent territory we are flying over! A light but intense brown predominates, with large patches of green and yellow, which look like forestland. Great crags rise in all directions; it is forbiddingly mountainous. I feel sure that mountain ahead is at least 25,000 feet high. There is no sign of a coast, nor any water at all. We glide over deep chasms and fissures, surpassing the canyons of Colorado; but no streams do we see, no rivers, no lakes. Nor, to my extreme disappointment, is there the least sign of anything artificial—no order, planning, or cultivation;

in a word, no civilisation. Have we flown 600,000 miles just to find another barren world, perhaps more picturesque than the moon, but bearing nothing more intelligent than vegetables ?

“ It is very bitter. But we had better make a landing, if this is possible, which I doubt. We have two means of alighting ; either by our floats, on a lake or sea, or by our stout undercarriage, with its thirty-two wheels : but for this we need a large level plain, and no flat land has yet appeared.

“ After flying in a straight line for two hours, at last we have found a stretch which might be safe enough ; it is on a shelf or plateau half-way up the side of a colossal mountain ; some kind of jungle starts below it, but bare rocks soar thousands of feet above.

“ Gystak is going to attempt a landing. Unfortunately there is a strong cross-wind, and it will need great judgement. He circles low to pick out a smooth piece. Down we come at a hundred and fifty miles an hour, a shade above stalling-speed. If a vertical eddy catches us, we shall certainly spin and crash. We race near to the ground, hit, and bounce.

“ Cries from all parts of the soarer ! We have crashed ! The second time we hit the ground too heavily, and a strut of the undercarriage gave way. We tilted over slightly, the tip of the wing was damaged, and a window smashed. Fortunately the atmosphere is breathable. It will take the mechanics less than an hour to finish repairs.

“ We are ready now to disembark, and I am looking forward to it eagerly. If there is no civilisation, there are plenty of strange things to excite our attention. Nowhere have we seen water, yet luxurious plant-life

is evident. Not even the mountain summits have snow or ice. Yet again, the air is almost saturated with water-vapour ! It is very hot and close, and I wipe my forehead continually.

“ If there is nothing animal here, how are we to account for the frightful explosion we heard, and Nacht’s flash of light ? Natural forces ? We may find out. *Now* I shall set foot on the untrod soil of Arion ! ”

PART IV

CHAPTER XI

MYSTERIOUS LEVITATION

WITH great excitement every passenger climbed through the manhole, and joyfully ran round in circles or jumped about, stretching their limbs.

The strange wild scenery was awe-inspiring, overshadowed as it was by the blue curtain above. There was a magnificent view from the plateau of rolling hills and massive crags rearing through jungle-areas. The blue mistiness was slight near the ground, and they could see almost as far as the horizon. They did not feel much lighter than on earth, because, although Arion had a smaller mass, its diameter was also smaller, so they were nearer the centre of attraction.¹ The air had a faint invigorating tang, which seemed all the more delightful after their confinement.

The damage was inspected, and, after a light meal had been served in the open, the two mechanics set to work. The air seemed to make some of the party restless and curious ; Grindin wandered away about forty yards, munching a potted-meat sandwich ; it was noted that Miss Lieben was also affected, and went in the same direction.

¹ Given equal mean densities, it can be shown that the attraction at the surface of a planet is proportional to the cube root of its mass.

Suddenly Dickens, who was chewing an apple, saw Grindin beckoning to him ; he made his way across the rough floor of the plateau, and Grindin shouted impatiently.

“Just look at this !” he said, pointing at his feet.

There was a long narrow cleft in the rock, invisible from a distance ; Dickens could see no bottom. He noticed something and shivered ; if the soarer had taxied a little further—that is, if she had not crashed—the machine would have run over the edge of the chasm. It was a strange misfortune, for it had saved them from death !

The three returned to the soarer, where the leader was making a speech, occasionally interrupted by his biting a piece of chocolate.

“I’ve just thought of something rather peculiar for us to ponder over—a fresh mystery, before we’ve properly disembarked !

“If my memory does not fail, Arion’s diameter is seven and a half thousand miles, but its gravitational pull is only three-quarters that of the earth. By all external appearances, the constitution of Arion is very similar to that of our own earth—rocks, atmosphere, analogous vegetation—and we could reasonably expect its mean density to be about the same as earth’s. But if it is, that means its gravity is only nine-tenths of what it should be ! Can anyone suggest, pray, what has happened to the other tenth ?”

Owing to the thrills of their novel environment, no one was paying any attention to him—instead, they were casting eager glances in all directions, devouring the wild mountain and forest scenery. Guidance realised this, and changed the topic by suggesting that

a small party should pierce into the forest a little way, while the repairs were proceeding, to see if anything of interest could be found.

Almost everyone, glad of action, clamoured to go. Finally, Smith, the surgeon, and the relief-pilot set off; they were supplied with rifles, hand-grenades, a few provisions in haversacks, and bandages and anti-septics in case of accident. Soon they were on their way towards the lower edge of the plateau; after a quarter of a mile, they reached the border of the jungle; they turned, waved their hands, and plunged into the mass of vegetation.

Shortly afterwards, the two mechanics, who had finished, came up to Guidance, and asked if they might go for a short stroll through the part of the jungle nearest at hand. After some hesitation, and much cautioning, he consented, and they departed, laughing and joking.

Guidance, Hesker, Hergesheimer, and Nacht set out to walk a mile or so up the bare side of the mountain, so as to get a better view of the district. Their intention was to draw a rough plan of the more salient features, and to make close observations of the countryside by means of a small telescope they carried with them. Guidance led the way, and Hergesheimer clambered several yards in the rear, gasping and frequently wiping his face.

As they ascended the mountain, the air showed no signs of cooling, as it does on earth, and they found it impossible to go with any speed, although their weight was under normal. After half an hour they flung themselves down, sweating profusely, and drank some water.

"It's no use going any higher," said the dripping Hergesheimer. "We can already see as far as the mist will allow, and we're far enough above the plateau."

The others readily agreed, and after a rest Guidance prepared his drawing materials, while Hesker surveyed the land through the telescope. Dr. Nacht, who had excellent long sight, pointed out two figures below them who were widely separated from the soarer, and Hesker swung his instrument down. He recognised them as the Parisian and Ilse Lieben, apparently deep in conversation.

Hesker realised that practically every member of the expedition was within view of his telescope ; he felt a curious sense of impersonality, as if he were one of the Three Norns, looking down on a little human world from a celestial summit.

There, apparently just below his feet, was Otto Lieben, inspecting one of the discharge-tubes of his engine ; close beside him was Dickens, Hergesheimer's assistant, cleaning a rifle, his youthful face bent down so that it could not be seen. On the other side of the soarer was a small nimble figure, lying on its stomach and kicking its heels in the air ; that was Gystak the pilot. The Arion air seemed to have made him more sprightly, and even child-like.

Far away to the side, Hesker's attention was drawn by a hardly perceivable movement. He looked, and saw a distant clearing in the forest, and two people walking across it. That must be Alfred Smith and the relief-pilot.

Guidance was beginning his rough map ; Hergesheimer had not yet recovered from the climb up the

mountain slope ; while Dr. Nacht was lying back, gazing earnestly and absent-mindedly at the veiled horizon.

The Czech's attention was drawn back to the soarer; someone was climbing out through the manhole. The figure descended down the ladder, and walked across to a small flat rock, where some provisions had been placed ; then the man, whoever he was, glanced round, as if to see whether anyone was watching. He bent down and filled a paper bag with something ; poured some liquid, presumably water, into a cup ; finally he walked back to the soarer and climbed up the ladder.

Just before he disappeared into the interior, Hesker obtained a clear view of his face ; he saw it was Nameless, the stowaway.

It was difficult to feel any keen curiosity in this drenching heat, but Hesker wondered what the stowaway was doing. Why, he thought, one might suppose there was still another stowaway, a third person, hidden in the soarer, and that Nameless was taking food to him !

He was undecided whether he should mention such an apparently trivial matter to Mr. Guidance, when the leader abruptly interrupted his train of thought.

"How can I draw an accurate map if you persist in standing in the light ? "

Suddenly something happened which was so incredible and fantastic that no one was able to speak for several minutes.

They were aware of a vivid red glow over the eastern horizon ; it was a horrible, frightening spectacle, like the lid of hell taken off. A moment later, the whole

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mountain rocked and swayed, as if by an earthquake, and—they lost their weight !

As light as balloons, they drifted into the air and hovered at about twenty feet ; the telescope and map-paper soared ecstatically beside them. For several seconds they remained helpless in this idiotic position, then slowly they drifted down again and resumed their normal weights. They lay on the ground in various inelegant positions, glaring stupidly at each other, but more was yet to come.

There came a trembling of the earth, then their ears were assailed by the most terrible sound they had ever heard. It passed, and the world was quiet, but the pain in their ears lasted for more than an hour.

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Four bewildered men stumbled down the side of the mountain—thereafter to be called Mount Levitation—and regained the soarer, their map not even begun. They found their companions in a turmoil. Everyone had been miraculously levitated also, and even the soaring machine itself had risen silently into the air and settled again. Because it was so utterly beyond their experience, no one had much to say about it ; they began to feel unsure of their memories, and their recollections of the incident became distorted and altered. Even Guidance found it difficult to recall clearly what had happened.

After a time they stopped talking about it. It was so utterly odd.

Henry Guidance felt himself gradually returning to calmness. Silence fell upon the improvised encampment. The leader's mind had seemed to lose half its

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connection with his material body ; it was as if his body had come down after the levitation, but part of his real self had been left behind up in the air. His perceptions had seemed vaguer, his thoughts slower and disconnected, and fatigued.

Now he was returning to a more normal rhythm. He looked at the distant beautiful border of the forest, sensed the steep majestic mountain behind him, and began to feel a fascination for the broken terrain. It was picturesque. It would be good to live in such a land. He considered how privileged he was to be among the first——

A hand fell on his shoulder. It was Dickens.

“ Mr. Guidance, you know the two mechanics who went out for a walk ? Well, they aren’t back yet. And neither is Mr. Smith and the relief-pilot. They said they wouldn’t be more than half an hour, but it’s over three hours.”

On an instant the landscape changed its aspect, as if it were a stage and the lighting had been altered.

Guidance looked at the mysterious border of the forest, and sensed the oppressive awe-inspiring mountain behind him. It came to him how stupid he had been to let his men go off into the forest. They had not the remotest idea of what might be in that forest, yet the two parties had left as if it were a picnic. This was a world that had never been seen by human men ! Yet they had come six hundred thousand miles to this spot, and someone had to explore. They could not go back without doing anything, and they could not all explore at once, and leave the soarer unprotected. He wondered what it was best to do.

Several groups had already gone a few yards into

the trees and called out, but nothing had come of it. They wanted to form another party and go off in search for them, but Dickens objected, protesting that it was no use endangering a large number at a time.

"I suggest that I make a short search for a few minutes," he said to Guidance. "It seems to me probable that they have lost their way, but do not regard themselves as being properly lost, or else they would have fired a rifle to let us know. I'll just go a short way, shouting as I go, and I'll be back so soon that nothing will have time to happen to me."

"All right. But if anything does happen, fire your rifle at once."

"You may be sure of that, Mr. Guidance."

"How about me going as well?" asked Hergesheimer.

"No, it's better for just one to go, then only one of us is in danger, or else for a very large party to go, properly prepared. Besides, I'm not going far. If they don't hear me, we must arrange something bigger."

Without delaying longer, Dickens made his way into the forest.

Not wishing to go more than a mile or two, he thought the gyro-compass too heavy, so took a magnetic compass with him, trusting it would behave as on earth. He entered the jungle in an easterly direction, and found that the trees were not so close together as to impede progress. There was a kind of soft thick grass between the trunks, and the trees themselves had a surprising variety of size, colour, and shape. Greenish yellow creepers hung from the interlacing boughs, but there was no sign of birds, insects, or animals.

Every hundred yards or so he stopped and shouted

at the top of his voice, but nothing replied. He kept on going due east by the compass. The whole time he held the rifle in readiness, in case some unknown creature of the forest should attack him.

At one time he came across a sort of creeper, hanging very low, and at its end was a large distended skin, two or three feet across ; he slashed it with a knife, and instantly he was drenched with a spout of water ! This was the first natural water he had seen on Arion. He made a note of this useful discovery, and went on his way, rather thankful of the soaking, which had cooled him down.

Further on, he came to a clearing, with some stunted trees, a rather colourless grey, in the middle ; he walked up to them—they were no more than six feet in height, and their soft pliable branches pointed upwards as if on springs. They had no foliage whatever, and the trunks were smooth and graceful.

Thinking he heard a faint sound, he left them and advanced carefully to the far side of the clearing. Arrived there, he paused and glanced over his shoulder, but, to his astonishment, he could no longer see the trees !

He wandered in circles round that clearing for several minutes. Then he stood in the centre and scratched his head.

“ Now where are those infernal trees ? ” he muttered. After a time he gave it up and set off again eastwards.

Two or three miles further on, he came to another clearing ; he looked out from the dense vegetation, and gave a cry of joy ! A gleaming white machine lay before his eyes ! At last there was a sign of civilisation !

But there was something strange about it. Recklessly he ran towards it in his excitement, but soon he stopped, cursing.

It was none other than the *Soaring Rocket No. III*. Somehow he had wandered back to his starting-point.

Several of his companions were standing at the edge of the forest, looking at something peculiar—it was the hind legs of a red animal, with two writhing tails; the front part was hidden in the undergrowth. Animal life at last!

He ran forward and gently prodded it with his rifle. A loud bellowing behind him made him spin round. Forty yards away, where the forest came round in a curve, two heads were staring at him from a bush! They were like sheep's heads, with almost human noses.

He stepped back a pace, and fell against one of the writhing tails. Again the heads bellowed, simultaneously. Whenever one of them opened its mouth to groan, rumble, or squeak, the other did exactly the same. Slow realisation came to him.

"It's all part of the same animal!" he yelled.

They were surrounded by an animal! Suddenly it dived into the forest, and they caught a glimpse of a long body, with ten powerful legs, then it vanished. Two heads, ten legs, and two tails!

Afterwards, they found that nearly every organ was duplicated. What a useful expedient of evolution to supply an animal with a complete set of spare parts! Dr. Nacht called it, humorously, *das Doppel-Lämmchen*, or "doubled-lambkin," because its heads were rather sheep-like.

Dickens began to worry over how he had walked in a circle and at the same time kept due east.

He knew there was a great loop in the magnetic lines of force in Siberia, but this happening in such a small area was quite incredible. For his peace of mind he was compelled to try to forget it, like so many other mysteries.

His companions were relieved to see him again. When he told them he had found no sign of the explorers, they decided to form a large search-party.

CHAPTER XII

NIGHT ON ARION

GUIDANCE was distressed, because the preparations had to be postponed owing to the sudden advent of darkness. A search was all the more necessary now that the Arionian night was coming on, for its rigours were unknown. Four souls missing from their little band of fourteen ! And one of them their surgeon ! Why had they not returned ? Why had no signal of any kind been heard ?

The darkness, which was more obscure than earthly night, added a new quality of helplessness to the sinister environment. It was very quiet in the jungle night. There was no stirring of animals or insects, no rustling of wind, no sound at all, except an occasional heavy trampling and crashing of the passing of some big beast. They assumed it was a *Doppel-Lämmchen*, the two-headed monster of the forest.

Guidance listened intently for a human sound, a shout, or a rifle-shot. Suddenly they were startled to hear a curious faint throbbing sound in the far distance. It seemed to draw slowly nearer, then it changed into a sort of irregular whine, which died down to a whisper. Then, very sharply, it burst into a mad strength which filled the whole forest with rebounding echoes and tremblings. Its loudness was insistent and frightening.

They stood silently, looking at one another with

paling faces, and unashamedly shivering. Something unearthly was happening out there among the thick trees. They could not see it, nor understand it, and four human beings were lost in the middle of it.

The whining was replaced by a superhuman groaning, then all sounds ceased.

The silence supplied a host of unpleasant possibilities.

"If we get through this night," muttered Guidance grimly, "without discovering further danger, or going insane through anticipation, we shall be fortunate. Anything may happen on this queer planet, where you are liable to lose your weight at any moment!"

In an attempt to relieve the mental tension, if possible, fires were lit in a circle around the soarer, though the Arionian night was no cooler than the day. Hergesheimer thought they were safe from the unimaginable dangers of the forest so long as the fires kept alight; he made it his special business to tend to them. As he walked round the circle, and peered with shielded eyes at the flames, the red light shone on his round figure, and Guidance noticed for the first time that he had very pointed ears, like those of a devil, and that his curious cock's-comb of hair, standing stiffly, was like a devilish horn.

He was looking at Hergesheimer curiously, when Hesker came up to him with a dark expression on his face. He seemed to be struggling with himself, as if he was nervous and not sure whether to speak.

"Well, Mr. Hesker, what is the matter now?"

"I don't know how to put it rightly, Mr. Guidance, but——"

He hesitated and looked round, then saw his friend, Dr. Nacht, watching him gravely from the flickering

shadows. This seemed to give him the needed impetus.

"You know, Mr. Guidance, we are in a very dangerous position here."

"We all know that."

"I don't mean the immediate danger of anything attacking from the forest, but the future—what I mean, and what many of us are thinking right now, is that we are already overdue for starting back to earth. Am I right in supposing the soarer is fully repaired and ready to take off?"

"That is correct."

"Well, then, every hour's delay is reducing our chances of making the return journey to earth safely. Is that not so?"

A shadow passed over the leader's face. This very problem had been troubling his mind for some time; he realised the dreadful responsibility which lay on him. What was the right thing for him to do? Delay two or three days, perhaps, in a search for the four missing men? That might mean that they would have to stay on Arion a whole year before they were near enough to earth again. Besides, was it certain they would ever be near enough again? Arion's movements were mysterious. The telescopes had failed to find her at previous conjunctions.

But if they left now, before it was too late, it would definitely abandon four human beings to death. Guidance felt the issue keenly. It was for him to say which it would be. His face showed his awful perplexity to such an extent that Hesker stepped back, almost in alarm.

For several minutes Guidance did not say a word,

but his face expressed plainly his emotion and doubt. He did not move, while Hesker and Nacht watched him silently, and the firelight flickered.

On an instant, a huge shadow was cast on the side of the soarer—a flat black figure, with a sharp horn on its forehead. It was the New Zealander, bending anxiously over a wavering flame.

The leader stared at the sinister shadow, writhing, then fading fitfully. For a moment his eyes held a look of horror. Did this portend what the end of it all would be? Did he foresee the doom of his Soaring Rocket, the crash from the skies, the fire-twisted girders, the smoking heaps of ashes and charred wood?

Hergesheimer grunted, wiped his perspiring forehead, and moved on—the devil shadow was erased from the soarer.

Henry Guidance took himself in hand. He moved Hesker out of the way, and strode to a central position under the right wing of the flying-machine. As if they had been waiting for something like this, everyone came up and stood around him. A flame hissed out a shower of sparks, showing the grave faces of the group, watching their leader.

He began without preliminaries.

“Four men,” he said, in a loud voice, “four Terrenians are lost in the unknown Arion jungle. Shall we wait till daylight and search for them, or shall we leave them to their fate, and save our own skins? We can return to earth at once if we wish, but the longer we delay, the less chance we have of reaching the earth. We may even have to wait several months, a year, for the next juncture of earth and Arion.”

"Why doom all of us," asked Dr. Nacht, "for the sake of four? This erratic planet may never again approach the earth."

Several shouted that they agreed with the doctor, and the leader was silent. He appeared almost too overcome to continue. He raised his hand weakly, then let it fall again. He realised that he had to give in.

"We should have a very good chance at the next juncture, you know. And, in any case, it is inadvisable to take off in this poor light. Don't you think so, Mr. Gystak?"

"Yes, you are right, Mr. Guidance. It would be very risky."

"Well, then, I suggest that we wait till dawn before deciding."

Most of them agreed that this was the wisest plan. Moreover, everyone was fatigued with the excitement and the closeness of the weather, and willingly prepared for a few hours' sleep.

They left a guard of three, in case something frightful came out of the jungle.

The night passed quietly, disturbed only by an occasional snore from Hergesheimer.

Just before the leader was preparing to rest his perplexed mind in sleep, someone came quietly to his side and spoke in a low voice.

"Mr. Guidance, I should like a word with you."

"Hello, Monsieur Grindin," replied Guidance, surprised, "what's the matter?"

The Frenchman hesitated slightly.

"It's this—I'm here on false pretences."

"What on earth do you mean?"

The Parisian swore.

"I feel I've got to tell you, for it seems as if shortly we might have a trying time. It would be too dreadful if you gave me something responsible to do, and the safety of the party depended on me."

The leader listened in bewildered silence.

"You see, Mr. Guidance, it's hateful to tell you, but I did not intend to come on this trip at all. . . . I don't know how I've managed to survive so far, but I haven't got the courage of a cat. Why, I always feel nervous even in an ordinary aeroplane. Believe me, Mr. Guidance, I deeply regret what I did, but it is inevitable that you should know sooner or later. I applied for a berth on the *Soaring Rocket No. III* because I felt it was the right thing to do for a man in my position; I was your friend, you see, and I was young and had a certain amount of available capital. I thought there was a possibility of my being refused."

Guidance looked at the surrounding darkness. Was he actually hearing these words? Was this a fantastic reverie?

"I was accepted; then, you know, there was only one thing to do. I hired a man to bring me an 'important message,' just before the soarer was due to take-off from the aerodrome, and so give me an excuse to leave before the time. I had it all arranged, a long time ago. . . . But when the time came I was drunk, and unintentionally remained in the soarer. When my senses came back to me, we were already out of the earth's atmosphere. How I've stood it so long, I don't know. This terrible place is too much for me." He ended rather lamely.

With a pitiful gesture he then turned away and disappeared.

For several minutes Guidance sat without moving. He felt stunned, just as if someone had hit him on the head.

If Grindin was speaking the truth, did it explain what had happened at Tempelhof aerodrome? It did not explain the presence of the police.

Guidance had been anxious before, but now he felt a different feeling. He felt sour. One expected to meet physical perils on such an expedition; it would be strange if one did not; but this kind of thing spoilt the taste of things.

He had prided himself on being the leader of a fine group of men, on bearing the responsibility of such a daring exploration; the moral failure of one of its members marred the whole expedition. He was disgusted and downcast. He could no longer depend on Paul Grindin, his friend.

More care was needed now than ever; his worries were increased.

He lay down and did his best to get to sleep.

Just before he lost consciousness, it occurred to him how extraordinarily inadequate Grindin's explanation had been. It was incredible that the reason he gave for applying for a berth was the only one; surely there must have been something else which made him join the expedition?

Guidance could not for the life of him imagine what it was.

In the very early hours of the morning of June 2nd, when most of the passengers were sound asleep, in the

hours when time seems to have forgotten its functions, and everything seems possible, from ghosts to ghouls, the youthful Mr. Dickens woke up abruptly, with a painful start.

He had been dreaming of a vivid scene in Kaikoura, where he had to go when they needed supplies and instruments for Mount Franklin. Mixed up with it all was the vast figure of his portly employer, waving a print under his nose, and exclaiming dramatically, "Arion will not intercept the earth's orbit !"

The words were standing out, bold and clear, before his eyes, and he caught hold of them with a sweep of his hand, and rammed them into a long-distance telephone-receiver. He pushed them down and stamped on them, but they refused to go through the cable.

Then the vast Hergesheimer stooped down and blew into the mouthpiece, and the cable burst with a loud report, scattering the words all over the globe.

Mixed up with this, in an inextricable manner, was the pretty petulant face of his young wife, scolding, nagging, talking. He was arguing with her in a weak voice, but he felt himself to be submerged and drowning in the river of her words. It was an interminable argument, for, instead of ending, it began at the beginning again, and went round and round in an endless cycle.

"No," he protested feebly, "Arion will not intercept the earth's orbit !" She took no notice and went on and on. He was engulfed, and when the river of words was pouring into his mouth he woke up.

What had aroused him ? He had been consoling himself again with the flagon of 1980 claret. Perhaps

it was that. He sat up in bed and looked out of the window.

Traces of his dream still clung to him, and he imagined himself back on earth. But through the window he could see a fantastic tree of the most ridiculous shape, framed against a frightening sky of misty dark blue, dimly seen through the early morning air.

This recalled him to his present surroundings—the surface of a mysterious unknown planet. As he gazed at the weird tree on the forest-verge, an immense sense of depression seized hold of him. For how long had this strange world been rushing on an erratic course through the skies? For how many thousands of years had the silent forest frowned on the wild plateau and on Mount Levitation opposite, with its jagged gulfs and chimneys and rock-faces, disturbed only by the heavy tramp of the *Doppel-Lämmchen*? Were these ungainly beasts the only animal life on Arion? That was inconceivable.

He got out of bed and poured out a tumblerful of the strong claret. He had drunk a little of it, enough to drive away drowsiness, when he started nervously.

Ah, it was this sound that had awakened him! There it was again! The same sound which he and Hesker and Lieben had heard two nights before, out in space, half-way between Arion and earth! He stood still and listened intently. Yes, it was very distinct this quiet night, in spite of its faintness, in the intervals between Hergesheimer's snores.

He drank the remainder of the claret, put on his shoes, and stepped into the corridor. He determined to tell the engineer, who would be wide awake, as

before, watching over his precious drawer. The light was on in his room, at any rate.

He walked down the corridor and entered the room. To his surprise, Otto Lieben was sound asleep, his head nodding. He shook his arm gently.

Herr Lieben woke up at once. Instantly he was on his feet, grasping Dickens fiercely.

"I've got you at last, you thief! Who are you? What've you got to say for yourself? So it's you who've had designs on my plans!"

"Mr. Lieben——"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Dickens—— I thought you were trying to steal my designs!"

Dickens was trembling with the shock.

"My, but you gave me a turn!"

"Sit down. Can I offer you a chocolate biscuit?"

"No, thank you. I came to tell you that I could hear that curious sound again, but I found you asleep——"

"Indeed, Mr. Dickens! That sound again, eh? Come on, we're going to track it to its source this time!"

"Yes, we'll show Mr. Guidance that we were not drunk before!"

"Wait a moment! Shall we rouse Mr. Hesker? He should be interested, you know."

"Yes, by all means, Herr Lieben."

The two excited men went to the room where Hesker, Nacht, and Grindin were sleeping. The engineer aroused Hesker, who sat up with a start.

"Quiet, Mr. Hesker! Do you recollect that sound we three heard during the flight? Well, it's on again to-night! Will you help us to make another search?"

The Czech stared for an uncomprehending moment, then answered snappishly.

"I won't! The last time I hunted for that beastly noise, you know what happened. I lost most of my sleep, and in the morning I was insulted for it! Not for me! Find somebody else, and let me go to sleep."

He turned over and closed his eyes.

"Well," said Lieben, grimacing, "that's that."

There came a sleepy voice from the other end of the room.

"Hello, whatever's the matter?"

It was Paul Grindin, the Parisian, speaking from his bunk.

"Ah, M. Grindin," exclaimed the engineer, "will you help us to search for a noise! It's a peculiar sound we can't locate. We want someone else with us, because Mr. Guidance would not believe us before when we told him we had heard it."

The Frenchman seemed reluctant.

"Inside the soarer?" he asked.

"Of course, inside the soarer. Come on, be a sport!"

The Parisian dragged himself out of his bunk.

"I say!" exclaimed Dickens, pointing in the direction of the slumbering Hesker. "Well, I never—and we didn't notice!"

Nameless was missing again.

"Now we're bound to catch him at it!" said the engineer. "All we have to do is to leave somebody here guarding the door, then go and search for him. Mr. Dickens, would you be so good as to stay here and see that he does not slip back? Wherever he is, we'll get him this time! Coming, M. Grindin?"

"By the way," asked the handsome youth, "who is supposed to be on guard to-night? Didn't Mr. Guidance appoint someone—one of the passengers, I mean?"

"Good Lord!" cried Dickens, looking startled. "I was appointed guard, but I'd forgotten all about it! It's a good job I woke up when I did."

The engineer looked closely at him. This was the kind of man to whom their lives had been entrusted that night! He was so preoccupied with his own gloominess and morbid thoughts, that he failed to carry out his duty! He would have to warn Guidance about Dickens; he might land them into serious trouble one day.

"Well, come on, M. Grindin," repeated Lieben. "Just hang around, Mr. Dickens, will you, and call out if you see him coming back."

The two men went out of the room, and Dickens remained sheepishly in the doorway.

"First of all," said the engineer, "let's go along to my room. I want to see if my drawer is still safe, before going any further."

Nothing had been disturbed when they arrived there. Leaving the light burning, they went in the direction of the remarkable "sound" as quietly as possible.

"There, do you hear it, M. Grindin?"

"Certainly I do. It is very clear. Whatever is it?"

"I wish to goodness I knew. You can see for yourself there's nobody about, and there isn't space for a child to hide, is there?"

"No, indeed, there isn't. It seems to have stopped now."

"Yes, it usually does, when anyone gets near."

"Hola! What's that?"

A muffled cry was echoing faintly down the corridor:

"Lieben . . . Grindin . . ."

They started to run, and stopped just in time at a corner of the corridor to prevent a collision with two scuffling figures.

One of the figures disengaged himself and jumped to his feet. It was Nameless.

"What is the meaning of this, gentlemen?" he began, with a show of indignation. "You are acting as if you were snatch-and-run thieves!"

Dickens, the other figure, grabbed hold of him and pushed him into his room, which was near at hand. The other two followed behind, and compelled the stowaway to sit down on a bunk.

"Now, Mr. Nameless," began Lieben, "you can just tell us where you've been, and what you've been up to!"

Grindin closed the door, and stood guard over it, in an apologetic manner.

Nameless did not speak, but remained sitting on the bunk with little concern.

"Come," exclaimed Dickens, impatiently, "you can't deny that we've caught you fair and square this time!"

"Gentlemen," replied Nameless at last, "I am disgusted with you. You are chasing me round the ship like a couple of suspicious schoolboys. Can't an honest stowaway stretch his legs at night, without people following him all over the place, and annoying him to distraction? Can't I go for a walk when I choose? Is it a crime to have an attack of sleepless-

ness? Why don't you padlock me in chains, as they used to do in sailing-ships at sea?"

"My good fellow," retorted the engineer, "you don't expect us to believe that you were strolling about the ship, in the middle of the night, for an innocent purpose?"

"I don't expect you to believe anything at all, Herr Lieben. I am not trying to steal your dry-as-dust designs. Whoever else may be trying to get them, you can count me out. You would cast suspicion on Mr. Guidance himself if he chanced to walk past your door."

"There are other queer things happening on board this vessel," continued the engineer grimly, "besides criminal attempts to force my drawer. For instance, there is this mysterious sound nobody can locate, and which is driving me half crazy. Moreover, I'm convinced that you know something about it."

"That is by no means the only unexplained occurrence on this damned planet," retorted Nameless. "Why don't you charge me with having caused the mysterious levitation some time ago, when the soarer and all its idiot passengers hovered miraculously in the air? Surely I must have been mixed up in that."

"Not so much of your impertinence," cried Dickens angrily.

"Quiet, Mr. Dickens! You'll disturb Mr. Hergesheimer."

"At any rate, Mr. Hergesheimer is sleeping honestly in his bunk, where he should be," returned Lieben quickly.

Nameless began laughing, and rolled about on the bunk.

"What on earth are you laughing at?"

"Nothing at all!"

He stopped and became grave. The Frenchman, who was still standing by the closed door, coughed, and spoke in a meek voice.

"There's that infernal sound again. I can hear it even through this shut door."

"Now as to this sound," said the engineer fiercely, "you know very well what it is, Nameless! I can see it by the look in your eyes."

"What sound?"

"Don't pretend you can't hear it."

"Shall I tell you what I think?" smirked the stowaway. "It is nothing more than an hallucination. Men who can hear things which aren't there, are in a nervous state which is by no means desirable. Everyone of us should have full possession of his wits; we can't have you going about suffering from delusions. Get a firm grip on yourselves, gentlemen!"

The engineer was speechless, while Grindin stared, uncomprehendingly.

"Of course, if you've been borrowing Mr. Hergesheimer's port——"

"Where did you hear that?"

"I happened to be listening outside the door when three of you were getting told off by our leader. I've quoted correctly, haven't I? That's Guidance's opinion, and after all, he ought to know. He is master of this vessel, isn't he?"

"Mr. Nameless, this time we've got Monsieur Grindin with us, and he will testify to Mr. Guidance that we are not such fools as he thinks."

"Will Mr. Guidance listen to him any more willingly

than he listened to you? Will it convince him that there is something somewhere, and that he should go to the trouble of organising a thorough search of every square centimetre in the ship? Do you think he'll take any notice of your witness? I rather suspect he hasn't much of an opinion of him—look at him. He's shaking in his shoes, I'll swear."

Grindin was looking uncomfortable.

"You seem to know quite a lot of what's going on here," said Dickens sarcastically. "Except the things we want you to tell us. You won't admit to knowing those."

"Oh, yes, I know quite a lot," replied Nameless, and began laughing again. "Hullo," he remarked, "our fat New Zealander is talking in his sleep. Listen to him."

Hergesheimer was muttering thickly, and waving his hand.

"Arion—Arion—will not intercept the earth's orbit!"

Dickens remembered his dream. Why, he had dreamt those very words. No doubt he must have subconsciously heard his employer talking in his sleep, and had dreamt that he was uttering the same words. It was a weird thing to think that Hergesheimer's dream had caused his own. Perhaps that explained why two people living together sometimes dreamt the same dream.

Now Hergesheimer was muttering something else, more faint. Dickens could not catch what it was, but the engineer put his ear close to the sleeper's mouth. Lieben gasped, but said nothing. The stowaway prodded the sleeper, and the muttering ceased at once.

"What a pity he stopped," said Nameless, with a grin. "We might have heard some interesting revelations of his private life."

"Why on earth," came a voice from the door, "don't we three make a complete search right now? If we poke about among the luggage and the stores—the sound *must* be coming from somewhere, hang it all."

"You're quite right," replied Lieben, "that's what we ought to have done long ago, M. Grindin. Why, if we actually find what's making the sound, that will make Guidance confess we were right, stubborn-headed as he is."

"He is rather prejudiced," Dickens remarked.

For the first time there was a frightened look on the stowaway's face. He caught sight of the flagon of claret standing on a table. Dickens had forgotten to hide it when he had finished with it. Nameless smiled.

"Mr. Dickens," he said, in a bright tone, "after all the excitement of being chased round the ship, and mauled about like a sack of potatoes, I'm feeling faint and thirsty. Do you mind if I have a little drop of that excellent claret?"

Dickens swore under his breath. He had no desire to disclose that, like his employer, Hergesheimer, he had been one of the culprits who had brought excess baggage with them. Herr Lieben looked at the bottle, and his eyes opened wide.

"Well," he murmured, "it would be very awkward if Mr. Guidance learned about that, Mr. Dickens. He must have been annoyed enough when he heard about Mr. Hergesheimer's port. I wouldn't answer for his remarks if he found this as well. He might even have it thrown outside."

"Would you like a taste of it, Herr Lieben?" asked Dickens, as the only way out.

"I wouldn't object at all."

"And you, M. Grindin?"

The Frenchman came forward eagerly. This would put a partial stop to the embarrassing questions he disliked.

"I should be very pleased, thank you."

They all had a glass, Nameless as well.

"It is certainly strong . . ." remarked the engineer thickly.

"Strong! It is best 1980!"

The sleeping New Zealander began snoring once more, but he snored unheeded.

Dickens filled up the glasses again. All four sat down on his bunk.

"This is certainly very nice," muttered Herr Lieben.

"Don't drink too much, M. Grindin," warned the stowaway. "Remember what happened during the take-off! Mr. Hesker told me something about that."

The Frenchman gave a grim smile. They did not guess just how calamitous had been his drunkenness at that moment.

"It is a pity you were not there to see it," he retorted sharply, "being unavoidably absent."

"This claret is loosening everybody's tongue," thought Dickens.

"Another?" he added aloud.

Soon the four men were sitting close together on the bunk, talking in low conversational tones. Such was the magical power of the wine. Gradually the socialising liquid made the chat assume a more confidential

turn, and the subject matter became of a rambling nature. Nameless and Grindin drank less than half the quantity imbibed by the other two, and they remained not far from normal. But Lieben and Dickens were quickly brought to that state in which universal friendliness is the only possible outlook.

The stowaway led the conversation in the direction he desired, in such a manner that the engineer himself suggested what he wished, before Nameless could put it forward himself.

"You know," said Herr Lieben, with emphasis, "Mr. Guidance has insulted us in a grossly unfair manner. It was as much as calling us liars, or lunatics. Why did we take it lying down? He shot out of the room as soon as he had finished belabouring us with his tongue, so we hadn't a chance to answer back. Now was that fair, I ask you? He's stubborn as a mule, thinks of nothing but his own dignity, and doesn't care a hang for anybody else. Just to show you what he's like, listen to this, this which Mr. Gystak told me. You remember, when Mr. Gystak was taking pictures of us with his camera, the beautiful comic shot he got of Mr. Guidance, cracking his skull against the ceiling? Well, what d'you think of this! He ordered Gystak to cut that scene out and burn it! He was so concerned about his own appearance that he wouldn't let it stand! He won't let anyone enjoy a humorous incident, because he himself is the laugh."

Nameless grinned. He felt an uncommon power over Lieben and Dickens; they were hardly drunk enough to forget what they were saying, but they were nicely plastic.

"He's not worth worrying about," he put in. "I should ignore him."

"You're right there," went on Lieben warmly. "Why should we trouble to find out every little thing that's wrong with his ship? Why should we hunt about all night for a squeak? Let him find out for himself! If it's serious, so much the worse for him—then we'll have the laugh of him!"

Grindin was puzzled. He did not fully appreciate what all this was about, not having been annoyed by Guidance's insulting behaviour.

"That's right," insisted Nameless, "don't let him put you out."

The stowaway felt fairly sure that his two new friends would change their minds the next day; but he was safe for the rest of the night, at any rate. No search would take place yet, and his secret would remain undiscovered. He was pleased with his skilful handling of the critical situation, but he did not show any sign of his elation.

Grindin was sleepy and feeling bored. He did not want to drink any more, but he disliked refusing the friendly offers. Suddenly he raised his head, his eyes attracted to something at the doorway.

Standing in the corridor, looking into the room, with her hand on the knob of the half-open door, stood Ilse Lieben. She was dressed in a dark leather coat, carelessly pulled over her pyjamas, and set on the side of her head was a fashionable silver and mauve night-cap. Her feet were bare, and she carried an unlighted electric torch in her hand.

She seemed breathless.

"What has happened?" she exclaimed. "I woke

up and heard voices and people walking about. Is anything wrong? I thought we'd been invaded by Arionians or something!"

"There's nothing wrong, Fräulein Lieben," answered Grindin. "We have been discussing something, that's all."

"Why, father, you've been drinking," she said.

"I assure you I haven't, my dear Ilschen, not a drop all night. Would you like a little yourself, Liebling—warm you up."

The engineer reached uncertainly for the flagon.

Nameless went to the door, and whispered to Ilse.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Lieben, we've been having a little bit of a party, but it's time we went back to bed. I'll see that your father gets back to his room safely, don't you worry."

Dickens laughed nervously.

"Yes, it's high time we were back in bed."

The draught of colder air from the corridor seemed to have sobered him.

A procession made its way towards Lieben's cabin. In front, contented but not quite certain of themselves, were the engineer and Dickens; then came the pleased but watchful Mr. Nameless; and finally the Parisian and Ilse, treading softly with her uncovered feet on the cold metal floor. Outside, the wild Arionian twilight glimmered dark blue and obscure, while the jagged mountain peak overhung all.

"Why are you coming as well?" said Nameless to Mr. Dickens.

"Hang it all, I am supposed to be the guard. I have to make myself responsible for things, haven't I?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Dickens."

At a turn of the corridor, a sudden thought struck Dickens, and he swung round to speak to the Frenchman.

"I say——" he began, looking over the stowaway's shoulder—but, curiously, both Grindin and Ilse had disappeared.

The two were standing at a window in a short corridor where a large red placard announced NO SMOKING IN THIS SECTION !

They were gazing at the shadows in the mysterious dawn dusk of the blue planet, the shadows of the tumbled rocks and the distant forest.

"Arion !" breathed Grindin. "A wonderful morning !"

That was all he said, but it made Ilse thrill strangely to this foreign world.

"Well, *bon jour*, Fräulein Ilse."

"*Guten Tag*, Monsieur Paul."

CHAPTER XIII

THE FLATTENING OF THE MOUNTAIN

THE passengers were all up by seven-thirty, and out of the soarer, many of them searching for the missing men on the outskirts of the Arionian jungle. A solitary figure remained near the machine, performing curious evolutions.

Monsieur Grindin was strenuously hacking at a tin of peas. Suddenly he was flung to the ground by an awful shock.

"*Suppôts de Satan !*" Could he believe his eyes? He was mad, *sans doute*.

A moment before, he had been standing on a plateau, but now it was a great steeply-sloping stretch of ground, inclined at sixty degrees. Where, pray, was the mountain? He turned round in every direction. The mountain was no longer there. In its place the ground was *flat*, flat as a pancake !

Grindin stared up and down, then at the tin of peas, to see if it had suffered any transformation. He heard shouts. Others, then, were left alive after this extraordinary occurrence ! He felt as if he was in a theatre, with a revolving stage ; the landscape was artificial and unstable like a curtain.

The cries became louder, and he looked up in time to see the soarer bumping and slipping towards him sliding down the slope.

He jumped out of the way, as it jerked past. A rock tore off the undercarriage.

The machine was sliding directly towards the chasm it had escaped previously. Was their only hope of escape to break up into fragments at the bottom of the cleft?

He ran down the slope and caught hold of the tail, but he might as well have tried to hold a runaway traction engine. The soarer rumbled and slid towards the edge, trailing its mangled wheels. A wing-tip overhung the edge, then Grindin screamed and pulled with all his might. The fabric of the rudder came off in his hand and he sat down suddenly. The edge began to crumble, then the revolving stage swung round again!

Grindin was flung on his stomach, and when he stood up, and spat the dirt from his mouth, the scenery was the right way up again. The plateau was again a plateau, Mount Levitation was once more a mountain. The precious soaring machine lay precariously, overhanging the cleft. The tin of peas had spilt on his trousers, but he took no notice. He wanted to look in a mirror, to convince himself he was the same person.

For some reason, no one spoke of the incident. It was too grotesque, too horrible. Not a word was spoken. Instead, they helped to move the soarer to a safer position. Grindin, his mind a tumult, found relief in the sane task of scraping the peas from his trousers.

Henry Guidance was dejected. The soarer was a wreck. With the mechanics missing, it would take them at least two Arionian days to fix it—an Arionian

day consisted of eighteen hours, half darkness, half light. Their safe return was becoming more and more doubtful, for every hour increased the distance between earth and Arion. He realised that two days of inactivity in this humid atmosphere, where illogical, unthinkable things might happen at any moment, would be very trying.

He proposed that the greater number of them, say five or six, should march about twenty miles into the jungle, partly to make a thorough inspection of the district, partly to find the lost men. He believed now that numbers meant safety. He would leave an adequate number at the soarer, at least four.

Dr. Nacht and Hesker said they would prefer to stay and keep everything in order. Their preference for each other's company was obvious, and the others did not regret leaving behind the rather irritable doctor.

Herr Lieben also stayed, in order to overhaul his external-combustion engine, while the stubborn Mr. Nameless was ordered to polish the outside windows.

Finally, two hours after dawn, the expedition set out ; it consisted of the leader, Hergesheimer, Dickens, Grindin, and Gystak. At the last moment, Fräulein Lieben joined them, refusing to be left behind.

Guidance thought he had better take Grindin, so as to keep an eye on him.

With a swinging pace, they plunged into the forest, steering by gyro-compass ; Guidance and Grindin were at the front, Hergesheimer following in the rear. All wore riding breeches, stout long boots reaching to the knees, and carried haversacks and rifles. The heat was too great to wear anything else but thin shirts.

After an hour they were forced to stop and rest. They dropped their haversacks and sat down with their backs against the trees. The heat in the middle of the forest was great. It was too hot to talk ; they just sat and perspired.

All at once a loud rustling made everyone spring up. They drew close together and their pulses quickened. It was a *Lämmchen*, worming its way between the trees at a rapid pace, with its ten strong legs. Its two tails hung lifeless, and the heads looked straight in front, taking no notice of the huddled group. It was partially clothed. Hanging between its legs were several long black cases, very heavy and bulky. One of the mouths yawned, then, in a moment, the ghastly thing had passed them.

"Something intelligent made that clothing, and those cases," remarked Guidance, with a tremor in his voice. He called after the *Lämmchen*, but it did not stop ; on an impulse, he began to run after it. "It's a beast of burden," he shouted, "and it is going somewhere ! We must follow it !"

Everything twisted round in this incomprehensible world ! A beast of burden with the load hanging from its belly, instead of on its back ! The others began to run after their leader, in a straggling line.

But two legs were no match for ten, and before long they were left behind, faces dripping.

Where was the *Lämmchen* going, and what was the purpose of its clothing, and its load ? With a groan, they put this fresh problem from them. They were far too hot to think, and their present worries taxed all their faculties.

Guidance took a reading with the gyro-compass.

Coming to a clearing, they halted and ate a brief meal. Then Guidance sent Hergesheimer, Dickens, and Gystak in three different directions, and sat down to await their return. They departed, with rigid instructions to be no longer than half an hour.

Hergesheimer and Dickens were prompt. The faces of the party became white and strained under the shining sweat, when Gystak failed to appear after a couple of hours.

"It's the devil's own country!" growled Guidance, and swore savagely. "Five men gone now! At this rate, there'll be none of us left by sunset."

Miss Lieben suggested firing all the rifles simultaneously; they did so, and Grindin said he heard a faint answering shot. He pointed vaguely with a movement of his shoulder.

Keeping close together, a scared, huddled group, they set off in the general direction, and walked until their boots seemed to be full of perspiration. The mysterious fate that was grasping them, one by one, was wearing out their nerves. Like children, they kept looking round to see that everyone else was in sight.

They paused at a large glade in the forest, where the blue sky could be seen above.

For a time they stood at the edge, staring at a monstrous object in the glade with fearful eyes. Then they walked slowly up to it, letting fall drops of sweat. It was a huge metal pillar, fixed in the ground, and it rose up out of the glade in a slanting direction. They looked up to see the top of it, but the incredible thing was so high that its top was lost in the blue cloud above.

Suddenly Hergesheimer seemed to go mad.

"What's wrong with this damned planet?" he screamed. "Come and look at this, all of you! This tree is a fake; why, it's got indiarubber twigs!"

He was right. The twigs were hollow rubber tubes.

Grindin was standing beside a grey tree, of a different shape from the rest. It had only three branches, and they were very regular and pliable. The Parisian startled his companions with a torrent of French oaths; then he caught hold of a branch and twisted it.

"I saw the damned thing move!" he cried. It was a nightmare.

The last atom of sanity vanished, when the grey tree raised its branches, slapped the Frenchman across the cheek, then ran away, with an awkward shuffling movement!

Other trees began to rustle and stir. It became evident that what they had thought to be grey trees, were not in reality trees at all. There were so many strangely-shaped trees in this forest, that when they saw these grey creatures, standing so stiff and still, and bearing a remote resemblance to a tree, it was natural to assume that they were trees.

They were rather graceful creatures, with slender bodies; there was a round excrescence at the top which may have been a brain-case, three tapering arms, and three small feet. There were no signs of eyes, nose, ears, or any other sense-organs. The most unearthly thing about them was that they were asymmetrical.

"Come on!" roared Henry Guidance. "We must capture one!"

Everyone felt instinctively that he was right—to get

hold of one of these obviously intelligent creatures would solve half their mysteries. No one seemed to have a clear idea how they would talk with a creature with no sense-organs.

They advanced in a body, and instantly the Arionians dispersed.

"Head one of them off!" shouted the leader.
"And don't hurt it!"

They isolated one of them, but he seemed to take it very calmly, and stood still. Wishing to appear friendly, they did not touch him, but suddenly the Arionian slipped aside and began running. His motion was lumbering and complicated, owing to the triple limbs.

Dickens was the best runner, and he was just able to keep pace, the others following as best as they could.

After running for several minutes, Dickens began to drop behind, but, to his surprise, the Arionian slowed also, and he was able to catch hold of one of the three arms. Thus the incredible chase went on for several more minutes.

Soon they burst out of the forest. Ahead lay the plateau and the *Soaring Rocket No. III*. Now the Arionian ran faster, dragging the astonished and dripping Dickens after him. A few final bounds, and the Arionian leapt into the soarer, leaving Dickens panting on the ground.

There was a confused murmur inside the soarer, and suddenly Nacht and Hesker tumbled precipitately out of the manhole, their faces white with terror. Lieben followed them, equally upset, followed in turn by—Gystak!

"I couldn't find you, so I came back here," the chief pilot explained to Dickens.

Nacht meanwhile had twisted round, and was looking at the manhole with some anxiety.

"What the devil is in there?" he demanded, with an aggrieved air.

"I wish we knew," panted Monsieur Grindin, who had arrived shortly after Dickens. "It is a specimen Arionian, I suppose. Hello, Gystak! How did you get here?"

The others arrived one by one, gasping and trying to get back their breath. Dickens sat up and groaned.

"That's the strangest prisoner I've ever seen," he said. "I thought I was capturing *him*, but he dragged *me* here."

"We were rather startled when the thing came upon us suddenly in the corridor," said Heskter apologetically. He had gathered his wits by now, and felt ashamed at the violent and undignified way they had erupted from the soarer.

"If I'd been in there, I should have come out far more quickly," retorted Hergesheimer.

Now everyone was standing around the soarer. Their attitudes suggested that they were standing casually aside, with unusual politeness, waiting for someone else to go in first.

"It is obvious," said Miss Lieben, "that the thing has come here on purpose. I believe that he, or she, or it, wants to communicate with us. Don't you think so?"

She looked round at the others.

"It does look rather like it," said Grindin.

"Someone had better go in with a rifle and finish

it off," said the doctor sourly, "before it does any damage."

Everyone seemed to pause, to consider this proposition gravely and fully. The girl saw clearly that the discussion was likely to continue for some time.

She startled them by coolly walking up to the soarer, and climbing into the manhole. They were so surprised by this unexpected move that no one did anything at all for several minutes. At last the leader raised his rifle and sprang to the ladder, but the Parisian was there before him. He shouted, and scrambled into the machine. Everyone began running and speaking and shouting at once. Unfortunately there was some trouble at the bottom of the ladder, for they were all crushed together, and no one could climb up.

They all stopped when they saw the Frenchman's head emerging from the manhole. For some reason he seemed to be in a very bad temper. He pulled himself out and slid down the ladder.

"It's all right," he said, briefly and harshly, then spoke a few words quietly to Guidance. The men threw down their rifles rather doubtfully, though no sound at all had come from the soarer.

Guidance turned to go up the ladder, but Grindin, was who certainly in a bad humour, stopped him.

"Don't go in there, man!"

Guidance smiled, and insisted on going up the ladder to make certain that everything was all right. Grindin turned away, and Dickens came up to him curiously.

"Just what was happening in there, Monsieur Grindin?"

"Why, nothing at all."

"Do you mean——"

The Frenchman swung his arm impatiently.

"Mr. Dickens, I ran along the corridor and burst into the observation-room—there was Miss Lieben, calmly and comfortably sitting on a chair, making signs of some kind to the Arionian. The grey creature was standing in the middle of the floor, swinging its three branches—its arms, I mean—contemplatively. I was rather put out, and didn't know what I was doing, but she needn't have made such a fuss. After all, I thought she was in danger, and I was trying to help.

"I raised my rifle and poked it against the tree-man's stomach—if it was a stomach. The darned thing jerked like a spring, jumped up into the air, then fell over with a bump, and wiggled its three stumps of legs. I can't imagine how the rifle didn't go off, I was so astonished. The thing curled up, rolled about and jerked a bit, and at last managed to get on its feet again. But the girl—as if it was my fault!—turned white and stood up. 'Get out, you fool,' she cried, quite fiercely. She said rather more than that. I couldn't say a thing, but just turned round and walked straight out."

Dickens could hardly keep from smiling.

Then Mr. Guidance came down the ladder, and shook hands with the Parisian. He coughed.

"You are quite right; she does not want to be disturbed. She seemed a little—er—put out."

"Was she——"

"Yes, quite violent, in fact. But don't take any notice of her. She'll forget it. Anyhow, the important thing is that she thinks she will be able to talk to the

creature within an hour. The thing certainly looks intelligent."

"But it has no mouth or ears."

"I don't know about that. I think she's going to try writing. The thing looks quite at home, and she's quite taken to it. It must be feminine intuition, or something, but she's convinced it is here for a friendly purpose. She wants to be the first to speak with an Arionian. 'Give me an hour of quiet, alone,' she said to me, 'and if we haven't got to some basis of understanding then, I'll give it up.'"

"So far as I'm concerned, she can have the whole day alone," remarked the Frenchman bitterly.

Mr. Guidance smiled. What had come over Grindin? Was it not rather brave of him to go into the soarer alone to protect Ilse from the grey tree-man? Or was it merely Grindin's exaggerated desire to appear always right and correct in the eyes of his friends? He was invariably courteous to the only female member of the expedition. But Frenchmen were supposed to be like that.

Guidance wondered just how far Grindin's wish to be like other men would conquer his fear, or conceal it; he wondered at what point his fear would become too intense to be controlled.

Guidance wiped his moist forehead and turned round.

He noticed the stowaway looking at the soarer with a peculiar appearance of disgust on his handsome Celtic face. Guidance had become almost resigned to his refusal to answer questions; he realised that this stranger had an unbreakable will, and that he would never do what he had no intention of doing.

But there was another reason why he had lost his anger against the stowaway ; as a matter of fact, he had proved to be quite useful. Without him, some of the routine manual work must have been neglected, owing to their loss of four men.

Guidance walked up to him, and spoke in a jocular manner.

“ Well, Mr. Nameless, what do you think of our Arionian ? ”

There was a quality in the reply which puzzled Guidance for some reason :

“ Oh,” said Nameless, disgustedly making a grimace, “ the thing can’t speak.”

CHAPTER XIV

BREAD AND BUTTER

TWO hours later, Fräulein Lieben came out of the soarer to get some lunch, but she would say very little about her progress. The strange grey tree-man stood silently at her side while she ate. Afterwards she spent half an hour copying out masses of peculiar symbols.

"We've struck something bigger than we thought," she replied, in answer to a question. "Already we can speak to each other a little ; by writing, of course ; but only crudely, as yet. He's deaf and he can't speak. I began by pointing to a table and writing the English equivalent, but I found there was no need to teach him English. Instead, he taught me an incredibly simple system of symbols, which makes English look as difficult as Chinese. Thanks to this, I can already write a few simple messages in Arionian."

She turned her attention to her lunch.

"I say," said her father, "here we are, eating away, but we're not offering anything to—it."

"I should like to see you offering food to him," laughed Hergesheimer. "He's got no mouth that I can see !"

"How on earth can he eat?" asked Dickens curiously.

"I don't think he does eat, if you ask me."

“Then how does he keep alive?”

Hesker buttered a large slice of bread, thickly and smoothly, and handed it to the tree-man, smiling. The thing took it up in one of its branches and turned it round and round. He was puzzled as to its purpose. After several minutes of what looked like deep contemplation, the tree-man walked on its three curious feet to Ilse, and calmly pulled a pencil out of her pocket. Then, with the sharp point of the pencil, it traced out a strange design on the soft butter.

A shout of laughter made the echoes ring.

“He is writing a message on the butter!” shouted Grindin.

The engineer’s daughter seemed to have forgotten her outburst of temper against Grindin. She showed the Parisian some of her morning’s work, and he began to take an interest in the Arionian hieroglyphics. After lunch, she went back to her lessons with the tree-man, and was not seen again till dusk.

The leader had an anxious afternoon, trying to get as many people as possible to help with the routine work.

Thinking of the routine work led him to considering the accident, which in turn led him back to the incredible cause of it—the sweeping flat of the mountain and the tilting of the plain—the dreadful upsetting of the world. But every time he thought of that, a torrent of speculations troubled his mind, and he became all the more acutely conscious of those other problems which remained unanswered—those other insane problems which lay in the background of the Arionian environment. All those peculiar events, such as the unknown

origin of the planet, and the levitation on the mountain, kept his mind more numb than perplexed. Because so many unnatural things had happened, everything had an air of artificiality and instability. He was always expecting the ordinary course of events to be flung topsy-turvy by some strange new incident. He could never feel sure of anything happening to plan.

To add to his worries, brief expeditions were sent into the forest all day to try to locate the four missing men. Now he dared not let anyone go for more than half an hour. He thought it advisable not to start a bigger search until Ilse could understand the tree-man's messages ; he felt certain the tree-man would be very useful when they could talk with him. He might even know what had happened to the lost men, and be able to give valuable suggestions.

For this reason he asked everyone to leave Ilse strictly alone with the tree-man, to give her every chance of success, as she appeared to be so enthusiastic about the possibilities.

During the sweltering day, no news came from the depths of the forest, not even a quaint *Doppel-Lämmchen* came to disturb them. The quiet became intense and unnerving, and it was very pleasant to hear the bustling of the passengers, and to watch the activity, the coming and going of the searchers.

His fat, and the moist heat, had an unfortunate effect on Mr. Hergesheimer ; he had to sit down and rest for several hours. It was noticed that Dr. Nacht was often inclined to be irritable, and he was avoided by everyone but Hesker. The youthful Grindin and Dickens seemed almost to enjoy the boiling heat, while as for Herr Lieben, he was too busy over-

hauling his combustion engine to bother about the weather.

They had supper at dusk, and Ilse was persuaded to emerge from the soarer. She was very fatigued, but triumphant and excited. She led the Arionian by one of its arms, and it followed quite meekly and stood at her side as before.

"Well," said Mr. Guidance, "can you talk to the thing properly?"

"I've had several long conversations with him," she answered and smiled.

Guidance was very anxious to know what she had learnt. He asked the question which was uppermost in his mind.

"Where are our men?" he said briefly. "Does he know anything about them?"

It occurred to him at that moment just how much they were taking this Arionian on trust; perhaps he should have said: "Where are they concealing them?"

Fräulein Lieben still held the hand of the tree-man, as if it were a child.

"He denies all knowledge of them; he knows nothing of their disappearance." There was a silence, then she went on: "Our Arionian does not regard himself as a prisoner. I gather that he came here deliberately, to observe . . ."

"But you said," repeated the disappointed Guidance, "that he can't help us to find the men?"

"I'm afraid not; he wasn't even aware that we had sent out any parties for a long distance."

"Is it likely!" said Nacht impatiently. "They have killed them all, and when this spy goes back to them, they will attack us."

Hesker murmured sympathetically.

"See that the Arionian doesn't escape—hold him as hostage."

"Nonsense!" cried the girl with vigour, and Grindin looked at her admiringly. "If you had talked with him as I did, you would feel that he is incapable of deceit."

Gystak saved an outburst from the doctor, by interrupting rapidly.

"Tell us more about them, Miss Lieben; are they the ruling intelligence on this planet?"

"Apparently so. I haven't had enough time yet to get him to explain all the things which puzzle us, but the *Lämmchen* are beasts of burden. The Arionians themselves evolved from a sort of tree. Even on earth we have plants, especially under the sea, which have a kind of limited movement. The *Lämmchen* are trained to follow certain routes without guidance"—the leader bowed—"but there were many things I felt were unsatisfactory. He spoke of their extensive civilisation, and evidently he regards us at least as equals. His attitude seemed to suggest that, if he had been the least bit of a snob, he would have had every right to regard us as very barbaric savages. But up to now we have failed to see the least sign of any civilisation, or even cultivation."

"How about those trees with india-rubber twigs?" demanded her father. "Are they natural?"

Like many parents, he was ignored.

"There is a strange twist in them, as I soon found out. They can't understand flat diagrams. Abstract symbols are all right, but any two-dimensional representation of an object fails to convey any meaning to

them. To explain where we came from, I had to make a model of the solar system from apples. They must have solid models. It is curious ! Then again, I haven't been able to grasp how they see, if they see at all. It seems to me as if their senses were altogether different from ours."

"After all," said the Parisian, "why should we expect them to resemble us in any particular?"

The others were growing inattentive, and at last the close night air sent them off to bed. Gystak was left on guard, to warn against possible attack. The Arionian slept, standing upright in a corridor, with its three pliant arms drooping motionless.

While Guidance was wearily preparing for bed, he thought he heard a faint noise outside the soarer, at the opposite side to Gystak. He went to the manhole and glanced out, and clearly saw a human figure making its way towards the jungle, unseen by the chief-pilot.

Who on earth could it be, and where was he going ? Guidance climbed out of the soarer, and set out to follow the figure. If something mysterious was going on in the camp, it was up to him to find out what it was.

The figure disappeared into the shadowy forest, and Guidance hurried, so as not to lose his trail. The night was so still that it was quite easy to follow by sound.

Once the pursuer was going so quickly that he nearly stumbled on top of his quarry, and had to draw back sharply.

Shortly the figure ahead entered a small clearing, and Guidance caught a glimpse of his face, which was burning with a wild Celtic radiance. It was Nameless,

the stowaway. He was carrying a bulky object in one hand.

In a flash, he had dropped the object, spun round, and thrust a revolver against the leader's head.

"Just put up your hands, Mr. Guidance! I have a word to say to you!"

Amazed, Guidance realised that he had been drawn away on purpose into the darkness, and that he was helpless. He could not imagine what the fellow wanted, but he put up his hands, and the man smiled in a melancholy fashion. But in his eyes there was a mocking madness.

"Just come here, if you please, Mr. Guidance!"

The leader felt himself pushed sharply against a tree, then a rope was passed round him and made fast.

"If you shout, you will be dead long before anyone comes, but just in case——"

Nameless thrust a handkerchief into Guidance's mouth.

"Don't you remember me?" Nameless asked, and laughed. "I have a better memory than you have."

Guidance stared at him, then shuddered violently. Yes, he knew now who it was! A faint memory, many years old, had stirred his mind, and, in a flash of horror, he realised the truth.

"I see that you recognise me," said the stowaway, watching him closely. "You didn't think that Gwilym Thomas would follow you after all this time, did you?"

A vivid recollection came to Guidance of that scene in the township of Toluca, in Mexico, when he had

killed a wonderful parrot belonging to Gwilym Thomas, and the man had come running after him with murderous intent, shouting curses as he ran. He remembered the terrific force of his bird-fear, his *idée fixe*, which had overcome him when he heard the parrot speak, and looked up and saw it for the first time, hanging directly over his head. He remembered the dreadful impulse of horror that had seized him, and the push of his elbow which sent the bird hurtling from the third-storey window.

"Well, Mr. Guidance," said the Welshman, "do you remember my parrot, which you destroyed deliberately? Do you know that that bird was the only friend I had for years? I had taught it so well that it could converse intelligently in Welsh and English. I had an affection for it stronger than for any human being. In my eyes, Mr. Guidance, you are worse than a murderer! My parrot has never ceased to haunt me from that day, and its ghost will never be laid until its slayer is slain in turn!"

It was obvious to Guidance that this man was mad. Yet was he not himself mad also, with his unconquerable fear of birds? Just what did Thomas intend to do? He started struggling, but the Welshman stopped him with a movement of his revolver.

"I want you to see something I've got here, Mr. Guidance—something which will possibly alarm you!"

Thomas bent down and removed the black hood covering the object on the ground.

Guidance turned white. It was a large bird of a kind unknown to him, and it had a huge beak, strong and curving.

Thomas put the bird on his wrist, and Guidance shrank against the tree.

"A very fine specimen, isn't it? Very clever, too. I've trained it to peck, Mr. Guidance, to peck at any small bright objects, such as eyes!"

The madman brought the bird up to the level of the leader's head. Guidance began to perspire, and felt his limbs growing rigid with terror.

Suddenly there was a tremendous roaring and crashing sound, and a *Doppel-Lämmchen* appeared from among the trees. The great ten-legged double-headed monster took no notice of the two men, but crossed the clearing at a fast trot, and disappeared from view as it entered the gloom at the other side.

But this incident distracted Thomas's attention, and in that moment all the strength of the prisoner's fear flowed into his arms, and the knot of the rope burst with a thwack!

Almost in the same movement, his fist caught the side of the Welshman's head with a frightful blow, which felled him to the ground. Without hesitation, Guidance pulled a silent air-pistol from his pocket and blew off the head of the bird. With a sigh of relief, he watched its shattered remains drop to the ground.

He turned round in time to see Thomas struggling weakly to his hands and knees. He pointed the pistol at him and shouted. Such was the leader's emotion, and so tense were his nerves, that the pistol exploded without design, and Thomas fell back, inert, without a sound.

Guidance stood over him, astonished.

"But I didn't mean to do that!" he protested aloud. Blood was trickling to the ground, and he watched it

stupidly. The blood of the bird mingled with the blood of the man.

He pulled himself together with a great effort.

He caught hold of the body and dragged it into some undergrowth, then abruptly walked as quietly as he could back to the soarer. He resolved to say nothing of what had happened.

He reached the soaring machine without disturbing anyone, and cautiously climbed up the ladder.

As he got into bed, he tried to realise that he was a murderer, though only in self-defence. Even so, he felt that he could never tell anyone about it. It was his own private affair, and he did not wish to disclose his chronic and pitiful antipathy to birds. It would never do to destroy his dignity as leader of the expedition, especially at such a critical time. He could not get out of his mind the vision of the Welshman's body, lying in the forest. He wondered if it would be possible for him to get any rest.

He was aroused by the sound of whispers apparently coming from the other end of the ship. Then, after a short interval, he heard someone tip-toeing along the corridor in his direction.

What the devil was happening now? Had anyone seen him come back, or noticed that Nameless was missing? He tried to think of some excuses.

He did not know what to think when Herr Otto Lieben appeared before him.

"What on earth has happened, Mr. Lieben?"

The engineer was trembling with a strong emotion; as soon as he spoke, it became clear that it was indignation that shook him.

"Mr. Guidance, excuse me for disturbing you so

late, but—I've suspected it for a long time—that New Zealander ! ”

“ What ? ”

There was relief and perplexity in the leader's voice. It was not about himself, at any rate.

“ For a long time, it has been in my mind that I knew why that fellow came on this trip. My friends told me quite a lot about him before we left the earth, and I knew he was dishonest, Mr. Guidance, believe me ! ”

“ Dickens ? Hergesheimer ? ”

“ Yes, Hergesheimer ! Often I've found him acting in a suspicious way. I never did like him ! But to-night—I caught him to-night all right ! ”

“ Why, what has he been doing ? ”

“ He came on this expedition with the intention of stealing the design for my new engine, and also the formula for the composition of my fuel, which I have locked away in a drawer. I caught him in the very act ! When I found him, he saw it was all up, the scoundrel, and actually had the impudence to confess frankly to my face, and ask me to grant him pardon ! Do you know what he said ? ‘ Mr. Lieben,’ he said, ‘ I am only doing this for the sake of a half-brother of mine, who is very much down on his luck. He is badly in debt—you'll forgive me, won't you, Mr. Lieben ? ’ But I knew he had made it up, by the way his eyes flickered. ‘ Mr. Hergesheimer,’ I said, ‘ I'm going straight away now to tell Mr. Guidance all about you. That's my duty, and I'm going to do it ! ’ and I am doing so.”

Guidance felt dazed. Hergesheimer, the jovial New Zealander, a thief ! He couldn't believe it. Then he

remembered that he himself was a murderer. He laughed ironically, and the engineer looked at him curiously.

Guidance coughed.

"Well, Herr Lieben, this pains me very much, very much indeed. I should never have imagined such a thing. But, you know, we have no police here, and no prisoners. We can't spare anyone at all, we need everybody. Now what d'you say to this—you and I will keep a careful eye on Hergesheimer, to see he doesn't do any mischief, but we won't tell anyone else about it. We'll tell him he won't be betrayed on condition that he does nothing else. Don't you see how important it is for everyone to work in harmony, especially now, when we are all in danger? I suppose this all comes about because I didn't take sufficient care over references at the beginning. I was in too much of a hurry. Don't you see how it is? Now won't you just go and tell him that?"

"But, Mr. Guidance——"

"Please, Herr Oberingenieur!"

The engineer had no alternative.

"Very well, I'll do as you say, but if I catch him at it again——"

Herr Lieben turned away and left.

Good heavens, thought Guidance, dropping back in his bed, this was a fine expedition! Grindin a coward, Hergesheimer a thief, Nameless insane, himself a murderer! He had been so enthusiastic over the trip, and the fine crew he had! Everything was wrecked now beyond recovery.

He tossed and turned in his bed, and managed at last to fall into a half sleep.

He had a peculiar dream that night. His body seemed to drop through space towards the flaming sun, and he fell so fast that he went right through it.

When he awoke from this nightmare, he found that he had rolled off the bed, and everything seemed upset. Gystak, the pilot, who had been on guard, was shaking him by the shoulder. He was badly excited and incoherent.

"Look here! Come and look through the window, Mr. Guidance. It's dawning already!"

Guidance put his hand to his head, which was aching through worry and lack of sleep.

"Well, what of it?" he said thickly.

"But look at the time!"

What a strange blue planet! The day was dawning four hours earlier than it had the previous morning! Where had four hours of the night gone? The perplexed Gystak went off to get some sleep, while Guidance roused the others by the ship's telephones.

The dawn, which was too early, gave him a curious fancy. The events of the previous night seemed so fantastic that he would not have been surprised to discover that one or two of its hours were non-existent.

Four hours lost or not, they had to take advantage of the daylight. The company hurriedly prepared breakfast.

Guidance certainly did not feel like facing a new day, but he was rather glad of activity, as it kept him from thinking over what had happened. He did not feel the least embarrassment on meeting Hergesheimer; he was too full of his own misdoings.

He wondered who would be the first to tell him that

Nameless was missing. He went to a quiet corner of the soarer and practised looking surprised.

He really did begin to look surprised when half an hour had passed, and no mention whatever had been made of Nameless.

Surely, by now . . . ?

Everyone was going about as usual, except Lieben, who showed signs of hauteur whenever he came near Hergesheimer.

Guidance was puzzled. Forty minutes passed. Breakfast was announced, and everyone began to arrive.

What was this mystery ? Not a word had been said about the missing man. Guidance had a wild idea that every member of the party knew exactly what had happened the night before, and that they were all keeping silence out of politeness. Then it occurred to him that last night's adventure must surely have been imagination.

He received a nasty shock when he saw Gwilym Thomas himself arrive punctually for breakfast ! By an enormous effort he got control over the nervous spasm which shot through him.

The Welshman was wearing a half-concealed bandage, and he was grinning, though his eyes were wilder. He came up and whispered in the leader's ear.

"Ah, you didn't quite finish me off last night. But you finished the bird all right !"

Waves of emotion passed through Guidance. So he was not a murderer. Thomas was confident, for he knew he was safe ; Guidance would never tell.

The leader wiped his forehead. One worry had left him—the belief that he was a murderer ; but another

had taken its place. He would have to keep a sharp look-out, in case he was attacked again. But he must not let anyone see his uneasiness.

There was one good thing, however—there would be no more stowaway birds to torment him.

During breakfast he tried to regain his calmness. He sat watching Gwilym Thomas, who did not take his eyes off him. Then Guidance turned his attention to Hergesheimer, who acted and spoke normally; he had lost none of his joviality and wit, and Guidance found it more difficult than ever to believe that he had tried to steal Lieben's plans.

After breakfast, as he was standing alone under the shadow of the great wing of the soarer, staring at the magnificent crag of Mount Levitation, all his personal affairs and trials seemed to drop from him like a cloak sliding off his shoulders. He felt an immense calm, a gracious mystical inpouring of peace, as if a gate to a purer world had swung open in his mind. It was the strange nervous influx of quiet elation known only to the mountaineer and the aviator.

His glance followed a ridge of the mountain, a sharp outline which soared into the misty blue of the sky, all the more imposing because of the low curtain of the heavens which seemed to touch its summit. There was an area of shadowed rock below it, scarred by many sheer screes and chimneys, in the form of a great arch, which made the *arête* itself look like a flying-buttress.

High up, on a projecting shoulder of the mountain, were two tremendous slabs of whitish stone, standing upright like two teeth, so regular and straight that they might have been cast in a mould. It occurred to him

that they resembled the two similar rocks, Adam and Eve, perched on the Welsh mountain Tryfan ; he decided to call them by those names if ever he had time to sketch a map of the district.

He sought for the ledge where the four of them—himself, the New Zealander, Hesker and Nacht—had rested that first day in this foreign world, when he had tried to draw a map. After some difficulty, he found it, much lower down than he had expected. It had taken them half an hour of perspiring toil to climb as high as that ! Why, they had barely ascended one-fifth of the mountain. It was a great pity, he thought, that he would not find time now to reach the summit. From the top there must be a splendid view of the forests and crags of Arion, a view of a quite different quality from that which they would get from a flying machine.

He remembered the event that had drastically terminated his map-drawing—the insane levitation, which remained a perpetual question-mark in his mind. Gravitation seemed to be a different thing on Arion from what it was on earth. It was liable to sudden and inexplicable fluctuations, quite at random, like the English weather or a woman's temper. No laws governed it ; evidently this strange phenomenon could not be experimented with—you just had to wait for it, like a volcanic eruption or the fall of a meteor. Even the *regular* gravitational pull on Arion was only nine-tenths of what it ought to be—even the normal gravity was anomalous ! Perhaps the erratic nature of gravitation on this planet explained its wandering course in the heavens, its curious changes of direction. The flight of heavenly bodies was governed entirely

by gravitation. Astronomers would have a difficult task on their hands if they tried to plan out the orbit of this irregular body.

But he realised at once that this explanation was entirely inadequate ; it was no use at all for the later marvel that had taken place ; he could not imagine how any variations in gravitation could in a flash transform Mount Levitation into a perfectly flat plain, and tilt the level plateau till it became a steep slope. As always, when he faced these problems, he was compelled to give up with a sign of exasperation, forced back to the irrational feeling that all this glorious scenery was only stage-scenery, and that the blue cloud-curtains were real curtains.

The level of his gaze lowered, and at once he was back in the world of personal worries and decisions. He had to confess that he was feeling tired, with a mental fatigue at encountering so many baffling questions.

It would be pleasant to be able to leave off at this moment, to drop all these responsibilities and demands, as if waking up from a dream. But life, unfortunately, was not like that ; he could not stop merely because he was weary.

Besides, it would be a pity to leave off now, when there were so many problems whose interesting solutions they might discover in the near future. If it were not for his troublesome personal affairs, and the loss of some of his crew, he might even be enjoying this trip.

Under the gaping rocket-tubes at the back of the soarer he could see Ilse Lieben and Grindin talking earnestly with the tree-man, who was holding a paper

and pencil in two of his arms, and was waving his third arm about in an excited manner. What important information was he trying to impart to them?

Not far from them, Otto Lieben and Gystak were climbing up a rope ladder, hung over the side of the vessel, no doubt in order to inspect the external-combustion engines. Nacht and Hesker were seated on a large flat rock some distance away, eating fried bananas. Dickens and the portly Hergesheimer were walking aimlessly over the rough floor of the plateau in the direction of the forest-line—Dickens as gloomy as usual, Hergesheimer whistling *In a Soarer in the Blue*.

The leader's eyes searched the vicinity for the surgeon, Alfred Smith, one of four who were lost in the forest.

Coming round the front of the soarer was Nameless, whom he knew now to be Gwilym Thomas. He was walking straight towards him. What on earth did the fellow want? He did not appear as if he were about to attempt any violence; there was even a smile on his Celtic features. Guidance straightened himself and turned to face him; it was best to be alert with an avowed enemy.

But before either of them could speak, they were distracted by a voice, coming from a point seven or eight feet above their heads. It was Otto Lieben, his bare head emerging from an open porthole in the side of the soarer.

"I say, Mr. Guidance," said the engineer quietly, "do you mind very much if I make a thorough search where I thought I heard that sound, just to satisfy my own mind! I forgot to tell you, by the way, but

Monsieur Grindin has also heard the sound, so there must be something in it, mustn't there ? ”

“ Oh, do anything you like,” answered Guidance wearily. He knew very well what the sound had been ! He also knew that the sound would never be heard again. He was sorry he had had that argument with Herr Lieben ; he had been very hasty, but he could not put matters right now, and explain to the engineer why he would find nothing at all, no matter how long he searched. He could not tell him that the proper place to look was in a certain clearing of the forest, just a few metres away. He would have to let the engineer continue to roam around with a feeling of injustice.

“ Sure you don't mind ? ” went on Lieben. “ Right. I'll put everything back that I disturb.” His tone was frigid with politeness.

Gwilym Thomas was smiling with amusement.

“ I hope he doesn't waste too much time in his search,” he said coolly to Guidance.

“ Just what do you want ? ”

“ Oh, nothing, Mr. Guidance. You need not be afraid—I'm not going to leap at you.”

“ I've got no time to waste.”

“ That's hardly true : you've been standing in this one spot for fully ten minutes, doing nothing whatever, except stare at the top of the mountain yonder, as if you were hypnotised.”

“ I've got plenty to think about, I assure you.”

It was queer talking in this casual manner to the man who had tried to murder him. He might have been a trusted member of the company. Guidance looked at the bandage with interest.

"Well," continued Thomas, "the only reason I had for disturbing your profound meditation was to say that I had my chance last night, and I lost, so I consider the thing is finished with—see? That's all."

He turned round and walked away.

Guidance knew very well that the insane Welshman was as vicious as ever, and that he was saying this, and Guidance himself was accepting it, just to obtain momentary peace. It was inconvenient at the moment to carry on the feud.

He knew very well that, at the next opportunity, he would have to look out for himself.

He could not see that there was anything he could do about it, except to keep a sharp watch on the stowaway, and especially, never to venture into the forest alone. He shrank from the very thought of explaining all this sorry adventure to anyone else, disclosing his ridiculous but insuperable loathing of birds. Any measure he might take against Thomas to render himself more secure, such as confining him, would certainly involve this. Moreover, it was not in him to kill or injure the Welshman "accidentally," so as to put him out of action for the time being.

No! he would take his chance. There were so many hazards on this perilous globe that one more would not alter conditions greatly.

It was time to start on the day's quota of work, and, perhaps, new mysteries and perils. It was high time to plunge again into this stirring Arionian existence, and begin to live once more from minute to minute, never knowing on what new threshold of adventure he might be hovering.

Herr Lieben came to him, having emerged from the

soaring machine with a very worried expression on his face.

"I'm afraid you are right after all, Mr. Guidance."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I've searched every single cubic inch of space in all the possible rooms, and not a single sign of any animal or creature did I find. That's what I expected to see, you know, some animal or other, a rat or something. Especially after M. Grindin heard it too. It is a mystery!"

"Indeed!"

"Do you know what I think, Mr. Guidance?" continued the engineer seriously. "In my opinion, it was some small animal which strayed in before the take-off, and now it's strayed out again! It will be wandering about in the forest. I don't suppose it'll last long, poor thing, whatever it was."

Lieben was interrupted, and Guidance aroused from his boredom, by a rolling sound as menacing as distant thunder. It increased to a loud rattling and roaring and bellowing, then two trees, at the edge of the bare plateau, snapped and tumbled to the ground, as something burst out of the forest, with the speed and noise and bulk of a tank.

"A *Doppel-Lämmchen*!" shouted Dr. Nacht hoarsely.

The bellowing monster, with its two heads and tails, and ten legs, appeared ferocious, as if it were running mad.

It seemed to pause a moment, then it plunged over the rough ground towards the soaring machine.

"Whoa—oa—oa!" shouted Lieben.

Gystak's head emerged from a porthole in the soarer, and he gave one look at the charging beast.

"Hell!" he shouted, and disappeared.

"Look out!" screamed the leader, for Dickens and Hergesheimer were directly in the way of the *Lämmchen*. Dickens fled for his life, but the stout Hergesheimer could only throw up his arms and take a pace or two. In a flash, the creature had brushed by him, missing him by inches.

Hesker and Nacht flattened themselves behind the large flat rock on which they had been sitting. There came a shout from the soarer—it was Gystak, the pilot, sliding down the ladder, with his camera ready for action.

He ran out from the shelter of the machine, and pointed the camera at the rushing monster.

"He's mad!" shouted the engineer.

For some reason, the thing paused again for a brief instant, eighty metres from the foolhardy pilot.

"Hold that pose!" yelled Gystak, hardly knowing what he was saying from excitement.

The creature grunted, then began a half-circle of the soaring machine, with the pilot madly in pursuit, working his camera as he ran.

Now someone else was threatened with danger. Ilse Lieben and Grindin had been conversing with the tree-man; they had moved several metres away from the soarer, and were in the open, with no protection whatever.

Without warning, the *Lämmchen* swerved and headed directly for this group of three. There was no time to move back into cover; no one had a rifle handy. The Parisian dropped to the ground in mortal terror. It flashed across the leader's mind: "There, at last, is something that's too much for him."

Ilse, however, stood her ground : indeed it was no use doing anything else, but she covered her face with her crossed arms.

The Arionian tree-man did not even drop the paper and pencil he was holding in two of his arms. Instead, he waved the third arm in a peculiar manner, and also wriggled the ends of two of his legs, using only the third for support.

Without hesitation, the *Lämmchen* came to a sharp halt, emitted what seemed a reluctant bellow, then turned and set off at a gentle trot back to the trees.

Gystak was dancing with excitement.

"What a great picture!" he cried. "What a splendid picture!"

Ilse helped the Frenchman to his feet ; he brushed himself down, murmuring that he had slipped.

Fortunately no one appeared to have been hurt. The delighted pilot took the opportunity to make several shots of the scenery, not omitting the peak of Mount Levitation, which made a particularly good photographic subject. He finished the reel by photographing the inert soarer from various angles.

"These tree-men," said Lieben, still trembling over his daughter's escape, "seem to treat these huge creatures as if they were pet dogs."

"Remarkable control," muttered Guidance absently, wiping his forehead.

Hesker and Nacht got up from behind their sheltering rock, and resumed their meal of fried bananas. Ilse and Grindin and the tree-man picked up the threads of their consultation where they had left them.

"Well, I hope that doesn't happen again," the engineer remarked. "I'm going inside to get a drink,

if you'll excuse me." He climbed slowly up a ladder and disappeared into the interior.

Dickens and Hergesheimer came up, perspiring freely.

Guidance saw Ilse nodding, and perceived that the conversation with the Arionian was finished at last. Ilse and Grindin walked briskly to him to give a report.

The girl spoke in rapid English ; he learned that the Arionian tree-man seemed agitated, and wished to lead them to some important place in the forest.

"I don't understand exactly what he wants," she said to Guidance, but he is anxious to take us somewhere, and show us something."

The leader forgot his personal troubles ; he pondered whether it was wise to put any trust in this unearthly triple-limbed creature.

"Perhaps it's a city," said Hergesheimer, and after much discussion they decided to go. Nacht refused to accompany them ; he was inclined to the opinion that it was a trap.

"You are putting too much trust in your Titanian," said Hesker, and when they looked strangely at him, he added, with a curious gleam in his eyes, "I beg your pardon, Arionian."

The doctor, Hesker, and Lieben were again left in charge of the soarer. Unexpectedly, Nameless asked if he could go, and after some hesitation, Guidance assented.

While they were pulling on their haversacks, Dr. Nacht took the leader aside for a moment.

"Mr. Guidance," he said, in a low earnest voice, "I implore you, do not go with this treacherous Arionian ; let us all remain near the soarer, and

escape as soon as she is ready. There is only four or five hours work necessary to complete the repairs."

"I cannot understand you, Doctor."

"It is my profound conviction that you will never return alive. Do not ask me how I know—I feel it in my inmost fibre."

"I assure you," said Guidance, strangely moved, "we shall take every precaution, but as for giving up the expedition, now that we are all decided and on the point of starting, it is out of the question."

It was evident there was a flavour of suspicion where the Arionian was concerned ; some remote idea of his being prisoner still clung to his companions, for on each side of him strode the watchful Hergesheimer and Dickens. The Parisian and Miss Lieben came up well to the rear, conversing merrily, and walking rather close together, owing to the dense nature of the undergrowth.

Doubts stirred in the leader's mind and he and Gystak continually looked about them ; was not some form of attack to be feared at any moment ? Somehow four of his men had been spirited away, and he began to speculate apprehensively.

CHAPTER XV

A MYSTERIOUS DISASTER

THE three left behind at the soarer were suffering from a bad attack of nerves. Three hours after Guidance and the others had left, all routine work was done, and the machine was ready to take off. After that there was nothing whatever to do.

They walked up and down, talking, and wondering how long their companions would be. They began to be affected strangely by the inactivity and the loneliness, and at times the doctor allowed himself to become irritable.

Herr Lieben offered the suggestion that they should take a short walk through the forest, in case they could see them returning. Mainly to pass the time, the three of them—Lieben, Nacht, and Hesker—did so, but they had not proceeded very far when they were alarmed by a distant ghostly sound, which echoed as if in a confined space. It sounded rather like a rifle-crack.

Greatly puzzled, they walked in the direction of the sound, but saw nothing out of place.

Then they heard a horrible groaning and inhuman sobbing. They stopped short and listened in cold fear. It was ghastly, very distinct, but not loud.

They began searching in a wide circle, but found

nothing. After several minutes they could endure it no longer, but fled. It seemed as if something pursued them. Once again, before reaching the plateau, they heard a shrieking and wailing, and they could not control their panic until they were at least a hundred yards from the last tree.

Many miles away, Henry Guidance was leading his perspiring companions through the wild jungle.

As they marched along, the Arionian occasionally motioned to left or right—not as they would have done, with one hand, but with all three limbs at once. Dickens shouted the directions to those in front. After a time Monsieur Grindin burst out laughing.

“Why,” he said, “not content with pointing his three arms, our grey friend points also with his three feet !”

His companions took notice next time ; it was quite true, and very amusing.

“Tree-man ?” exclaimed the Frenchman. “His name would be *three-man* !”

Ilse laughed.

During their second rest, Guidance was pumping an oil-stove, when, without warning, the ground gave a violent lurch and everyone collapsed flat. They all lay in the postures in which they had fallen, unable to move in the slightest. The oil-stove fell over and caught fire, but no one could do anything.

Guidance could not prevent an exclamation of dismay. Was this paralysis the feared attack by unknown weapons ? If so, the Arionians had a terrible power in their hands. He struggled to get up, but he could not raise himself an inch. He felt an immense

oppression, a physical oppression, and groans of terror came from his helpless companions. A frightening rumble came from the earth, set the foliage trembling and put their teeth on edge. The Arionian also was affected by the general disaster. His six limbs spread out comfortably, and his brain-excrescence rested on the ground, with a suggestion of patient waiting.

There was one of those useful distended water-bladders hanging from a creeper above the leader's head. He watched it, in sudden surprise and alarm as the bottom swelled out, jerked quickly to a point, and burst. The water fell in a shower on his head with astonishing force ; indeed, he was nearly stunned. The shock of the drenching was nothing compared with the surprise of this fact.

After a few moments the unaccountable malady suddenly left them, and they all rose thankfully to their feet. They were too much put out to be amused at their leader's wetting, but he himself sat silent and pondering throughout the meal that followed.

The incident of the bladder had put an immense idea into his head, an idea which he saw only dimly, but which perplexed and moved him profoundly. The idea stirred and confused and muddled his mind. He could not quite grasp it.

"Fraülein Lieben," said Gystak, wiping his brow, "why not ask your grey friend to explain what happened to us just now? He should know. Why not ask him to explain some of the other mysteries of this cursed planet? Arion has been a problem ever since old Hesker caught the first glimpse of it through his telescope in Königgrat. Perhaps we may learn why it was never seen before then, for example."

"I should be surprised if the Arionian understands these problems," said Hergesheimer, "despite his boasted civilisation, of which we haven't seen much so far. They seem pretty crude to me. No clothes or anything. By the way, Fraülein, how do you call him? What's his name?"

"*Ach! Sehr komisch!*" she laughed. "He has no name, at least only a soundless symbol on paper. There is no spoken language, as they have neither tongue nor ears."

"Of course, I'd forgotten. That's awkward for us. I suggest we follow Crusoe, and give him the name of the day on which he was found. Let's see, reckoning from earth, yesterday was a Monday."

"*Jawohl! Montag heisst er doch! Das ist famos!*"

Thenceforward the grey son of Arion was called Monday.

The girl asked him about the recent strange happening, but the reply she got seemed evasive, or incomprehensible.

"I don't understand it at all," she said, frowning over rows of symbols. Monsieur Grindin came over to see if he could help, but he was puzzled, although he had been studying Arionian expressions almost as long as Ilse, and the symbolism was undoubtedly very simple.

Following Gystak's suggestion, Ilse asked Monday why Arion had never been seen before, also how it was that the earth had been miraculously saved from a collision. To her immense mystification, she received the same unintelligible reply to these two questions as to the first.

"Ah," exclaimed Guidance, starting from a reverie,

"I knew it ! Find the solution to *one* of these problems, and you have solved them all ! "

"What ! Do you think you know the solution, then ? " said Gystak, but he would not answer their curious questioning.

"To tell you the truth," he said quietly, in an aside to Hergesheimer, "I have only a very foggy notion in my head, and for the life of me I can't get hold of it properly."

He sighed, with a worried expression on his face.

When they were moving off, Grindin caught his foot on a fallen branch, and as he stumbled his rifle fell to the ground, producing an uncommon clanking noise. Rather startled, he bent down and dragged aside some of the undergrowth near the base of a tree. A shining round object appeared to project from the ground and pass into it again a foot or two away.

"The devil ! " he said, kicking it. "Look what we've got here ! "

It was an ordinary metal drain-pipe !

But no one had time to inspect this new discovery. Monday was near the front of the line, suddenly halted and turned round. He stood as if watching or listening intently, although he had no apparent eyes or ears, towards something in their rear. Then he became agitated.

He went to Ilse, who gave him paper and pencil, and he began drawing symbols rapidly. She read them at a glance, and the others saw her turn pale. Gystak heard her whisper "*mein Vater*," then she pulled herself together and addressed the company.

"Our friend Monday," she announced, "tells me that we must return to the soarer at once. I can't tell

how he knows, but he says that something strange is happening, some danger threatens. At once, he says, at once ! ”

The rest could do nothing but obey. To their amazement, however, instead of returning along their tracks, Monday and the girl began to run forward in the same direction in which they had been going, directly away from the plateau. Resentfully, not a little puzzled, but trusting blindly, they raced after her. Guidance, as he plunged and stumbled through the trees, felt that he was not acting in a leaderly manner at all. Where was caution and prudence ? Gone to the winds ! He forgot them and impatiently wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

The Parisian caught up with the girl, and the two ran side by side through the close damp jungle air.

The trees thinned and ended. There was a large open space, a gentle hollow in the ground. Nearby was a large circular opening, like some kind of pit. The sense of wonder of the explorers had been greatly lessened by the horrible heat, and the irritation of many insoluble problems, yet when they drew closer and looked into the pit, none could suppress a gesture of awe.

For the opening, possibly two hundred feet across, was covered by a single sheet of clear glass. It had been delicately polished into a gentle concave form ; nowhere did an air-bubble, a scratch, or a strain spoil its beauty. It was a wonderful piece of work.

While most of them were staring at this lake-like expanse of glass, trying to guess what its purpose could be, Monday ran across the glade, and with his three arms invited them to follow.

"He's going to show us a short cut back," Gystak cried, "Hurry up, all of you." They hastened to obey.

After half an hour through fresh jungle they were dreadfully fatigued, and the plateau was a welcome sight. The leader had been getting more anxious ; if Monday was right, what catastrophe had overtaken the soarer? Had its three guards been attacked by *Lämmchen*, or had a new earthquake tumbled the machine into the fissure, which it had already avoided twice? Perhaps Nacht, Hesker and Lieben had been overcome by some fresh, inconceivable peril.

Guidance felt an extreme impatience as they drew near the plateau, and at the same time a certain reluctance to learn the truth—it might be too dreadful ; it might be fatal for the whole party.

They broke out of the fringe of the jungle ; Mount Levitation appeared clear and immense before them. Guidance drew in a breath and surveyed the wide expanse.

A sudden aching desolation swept over him, almost before he felt alarm. Not a single human being was to be seen along the whole length of the plateau. *Soaring Rocket No. III* had vanished without a trace !

The little party stood stock still in stunned silence. Their one hope of returning to earth had vanished with the soarer. Realisation of this terrible fact prevented them from thinking clearly. Until Gystak proposed it, no one thought of making a detailed search.

"You are right," said Guidance. "We might come across a survivor of the catastrophe, or some clue as

to what has happened. But, first of all, Fräulein Lieben, be so good as to ask Monday if he knows what happened."

"He says that he doesn't know, Mr. Guidance. With his unearthly senses, he perceived a confusion and bustle on the plateau; but the next time he 'looked'—so to speak—it was deserted."

"It is ironic," said Hergesheimer gravely. "Dr. Nacht warned us so carefully of the perils of wandering into unknown Arion, now some strange fate has overtaken him."

Despairing and mystified, the travellers and Monday made for Mount Levitation. They ascended to a hundred feet, so as to give them a more comprehensive view. As they were climbing, Dickens cried out that he saw a metal object some distance away.

They headed towards the object, and saw that it was a rifle. What did this solitary relic mean? There was a piece of paper tied roughly round the barrêl with string. On it, in pencil, the following message had been hastily scribbled:

"God help me and the rest, I am being carried off."

"It's my father's writing!" said Miss Lieben quietly.

It was evident that the engineer had intended to write more, but had been interrupted. The last part of the sentence was less legible than the first.

The three guards must have been attacked and forcibly removed. But where? And what had happened to the soarer?

"The message offers an indication of the direction the attackers went," said Gystak. "Obviously Lieben dropped his rifle while they were on their way, because

it is large and would attract our attention. Now a line joining the site of the soarer and the place where the rifle was dropped gives us the general direction."

On this slender chance they proceeded in the direction the chief pilot indicated.

Ilse broke their gloomy silence.

"Monday tells me," she said, "that there are wild parts of the remoter forests which the Arionians never bother to visit, and many strange creatures inhabit these parts. He thinks our friends may have been attacked and kidnapped by some of them."

There seemed nothing to reply to this pessimistic information, and an even more profound silence fell upon the party. After a time Grindin realised how weary Ilse was becoming, so he gave her an arm and took her haversack.

They must have gone for several miles before Guidance spoke again.

"How is it we have never seen any free natural water? With the air saturated like this, and all this prolific vegetation, there must be a large body of water somewhere, a considerable area exposed, either rivers, a lake, a sea. Then, it has not rained since we've been here. Yet another mystery! The longer we stay on Arion, the more incomprehensible it becomes. Fräulein, ask Monday how it is we have seen no lakes or rivers in this mountainous country."

"Very well . . . He does not seem to understand the question."

"Oh, leave it. Another thing! Where on earth is this Arionian civilisation? We've covered miles of territory since we landed, and we've not seen even a hut. Where do they live?"

"I will ask him . . . He answers, *everywhere!* What do you make of that? *Everywhere!*"

"Evidently he misunderstood again."

"But no, he did not hesitate."

"But the answer is absurd."

"Undoubtedly."

"Look to the right!" shouted Dickens.

From a clearing in the forest a great metal structure, stiff and straight, rose up in a slanting direction and buried its top in the blue clouds. It was like the other they had already seen. A few thousand yards further on they came to something so tremendous that a grotesque quality of unreality came into their search.

It was a colossal hollow cylinder, lying on the ground, at least a quarter of a mile wide and a mile long. One end of it appeared to merge into a hill-side, while the other end was unobstructed. They approached it, not able to believe their eyes.

"Is it possible!" murmured the leader. "Fräulein Lieben, ask Monday what this infernal thing is."

She scribbled a message, and received a scrawled reply. For a long time she studied it, then she blushed and became confused.

"I don't understand this," she said. "What I need," she admitted, "is another lesson in Arionian. When we rest again I'll confer with Monday, and I hope we shall be able to clear up many questions then."

Grindin pondered over the symbols, but gave it up in despair.

After a time they were forced to rest from the persistent heat, and partake of a meal. Gystak was

hammering a tin-opener into a tomato can when a thought suddenly struck him.

"Strange!" he said. "Can any of you remember seeing Monday eat yet? Surely he must eat."

No one had seen him eat.

The girl explained that the Arionians could go three or four days without food; in fact, it was usual only to have a meal every three or four days. She said this seemed peculiar, only because earthmen are accustomed to follow the natural rhythm, repeating a daily cycle.

But how, in the name of heaven, did Arionians eat? They had no mouths, or anything in the least like a mouth.

Ilse did not know, she said. Shortly, many things would become clear, when she had had a further lesson.

A shot sounded from the depths of the jungle, faint and sharp. The startled Gystak cut his finger with the opener, and everyone stopped what they were doing. They were now seated in a small clearing.

Monday was as worried as they were. Fire-arms were not used on Arion, he indicated. Who, then, had fired the shot—a survivor from the *Soaring Rocket No. III*, or one of the four men who had vanished previously? Whoever it was, he must be found at once.

For comfort, most of them had taken off their boots, as well as their packs, and ammunition belts, but three of them were still fully equipped—Gystak, the Parisian, and Nameless. These set off at once towards the direction of the sound, while the others prepared to follow.

Guidance listened anxiously for further shots, but he could hear nothing more, save the sounds of his

three companions, as they made their way from the clearing.

A few minutes passed, but nothing more occurred.

Everyone stood quivering with excitement as a loud crash came from the forest, a splintering and breaking, shouts and screams. As Guidance dragged on his boots, a horrible groan was heard. It was fearsome in the clearing, no one knowing what danger had overcome Gystak, Grindin, and Nameless out there in the forest. They moved together into a group, silent and appalled, but Guidance strode forward. He had gone a few paces, when someone broke from the forest and staggered across the clearing. Only one of the three had returned—it was Gystak. He was waving his arms and screaming.

“Run like hell! Run like hell!”

He turned back and the others followed.

“I know what happened to the two missing mechanics,” shouted the pilot to Guidance. “The one who fired the shot was lying at the bottom of a concealed pit, with his fellow, unconscious or dead, beside him. I got there first, and looked back in time to see the ground give way beneath Nameless and Monsieur Grindin. They had fallen into another pit—I ran and looked over.”

He was hoarse with emotion.

“Grindin was wriggling about—I think his leg’s broken, but Nameless fell on his head, and was lying still.”

When Guidance and his companions reached the concealed pits, they hastily tied creepers together and brought up the injured and the dead. Nameless was dead, and in the other pit only one

mechanic was left alive, and he unconscious. None had escaped injury.

While the injured were being tended, the girl conversed with Monday, who seemed agitated. He had much to say, and she translated to Guidance.

"These cursed pits," she said, "were made by the Arionians, as a warning to the *Lämmchen*, and as a punishment, in case they strayed into parts of the forest where they were not wanted. It is part of their training as beasts of burden to keep to certain tracks. Monday had not realised that we have eyes like *Lämmchen*; as we know, obstacles do not hinder his vision, and the pits are not concealed to him. He is very concerned and apologetic, and rightly. He is going to show us some more pitfalls in the forest, where we are sure to find Mr. Smith and the relief-pilot, and possibly father, Hesker, and Dr. Nacht. But first, he says he will fetch more Arionians to help us with the injured."

"I wonder if the doctor's party has fallen into a pit," said Gystak gloomily.

"This is a dreadful business," muttered Guidance. "Will any of us get back to earth alive? There goes Monday to summon help. He must be quick. If any are left alive in the pits, they will be dying of starvation."

To everyone's relief, in less than ten minutes, six Arionians appeared.

By nightfall all the pits had been searched, and the survivors made comfortable. Smith and the relief-pilot were found and everyone accounted for, except the trio in the soarer. The Arionians dressed the broken limbs efficiently, and brought soft matting and pillows.

The survivors were so pleased to find themselves rescued that their cheerfulness did much to make the others forget that two had died.

The evening meal, with the quaint Arionians looking silently on, was almost bright with the atmosphere of reunion. But Guidance could not forget the sinister disappearance of the soarer.

The girl sat beside the Parisian, who was lying outstretched on the Arionians' comfortable mats. He was out of pain, but she insisted on feeding him.

Gystak was watching the unearthly grey creatures curiously.

"I wish they'd hurry up and eat!" he muttered.
"I'm dying to know how they manage it!"

Some time later Gystak was looking at his film-negatives, which he had found time to fix. There was a markedly thoughtful expression on his face as he held them up to the light in turn.

"That's funny," he decided, "very funny, to say the least. Our Czechoslovakian, Mr. Hesker, does not appear on any of these negatives. I can't see his face anywhere. Now I come to think of it, he wasn't even in our group-picture in the *Münchner Illustrierte Presse*. It's peculiar—to say the least of it."

CHAPTER XVI

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SUN

AFTER the evening meal was finished Henry Guidance went to have a look at some of the pits.

On the way he stopped to pick up a note-book which he saw lying on the ground. On the cover it had printed in black ink :

ILSE LIEBEN

Tagebuch

It was Ilse's diary, which she must have dropped. He turned round, intending to give it back to its owner, but it opened in his hand, and a sentence caught his eye. Idly he read a few words, but they were enough to arouse his attention, and he gasped.

He realised that he would have to read the whole lot. Rather guiltily and hesitatingly, he made his way to a quiet corner and opened the book.

He tried to justify his conduct by saying that he was the leader, while she was an unwanted stowaway ; besides it was essential for him to know exactly what was going on. He was beginning to suspect that quite a number of things were happening without

his knowledge ; the more he knew, the better he could be prepared for—eventualities.

Yet he felt an uneasy reluctance as he opened the book.

On the very first page he got a shock :

“ Blessed Mr. Henry thinks I joined his trip through scientific enthusiasm ! Well, it won’t do any harm for him to think so.”

So she had lied to him !

“ I wonder what his opinion would be if he knew that I hid myself on the soarer because I was scared to death of being accused of stealing the Gräfin von Freiburg’s pearl necklace ? ”

Guidance started. Did this explain the arrival of the police at Tempelhof aerodrome ?

“ The countess herself said quite plainly that she suspected me, but the real reason why I was so frightened was because the idea was so near to my own intentions. At times, I had actually imagined myself doing such a thing. It seemed so ridiculous that she should be wearing such a useless article round her neck, and that I should have to watch it, day after day, and be in so much need of its money value. When I learnt that someone had really stolen it, I was startled.

“ But the main reason for stowing myself away was to ‘ hook ’ Paul Grindin, and I think I’ve nearly succeeded in doing that. Ever since I saw his photograph for the first time, in a passenger car in München, I had wanted to meet him——”

Guidance closed the diary ; he did not wish to read any more.

Well, at any rate, it was owing to Ilse’s proficiency

in languages that they had been able to speak to Monday, and understand a few of his replies. That much was due to her.

He thought he knew now why Grindin appeared to be getting somewhat braver. If she was the cause of that, then Guidance could forgive her something.

Now he remembered : at first, Grindin had called her *Fräulein Lieben*, then *Ilse*, and finally *Ilschen*. The "dear diminutive" ! The beloved Elizabeth ! Huh !

Suddenly he realised the true reason why the Frenchman had applied for a berth. It was obviously so that he would do the right thing in *Ilse's* eyes ; moreover, if his plan had worked as intended—that is, if he had not become drunk—he would have been left behind when the soarer took off—left behind with *Ilse*, and *Ilse's* father unable to interfere !

Guidance could not help laughing. It would have been amusing if both their plans had worked—if *Ilse*, in order to be near Grindin, had gone off in the soarer, while Grindin, in order to be near *Ilse*, had stayed behind !

Guidance was surprised when he caught himself laughing. How could he laugh when he had so much on his mind ? Then it came to him that he had one worry less : *Gwilym Thomas* had been killed in the pit.

While he was in this mood, he felt an amused curiosity to see what were the latest words in *Ilse's Tagebuch*. He picked up the book again, and glanced at the last page that contained writing. There was part of a sentence continued from the previous day :

"—I wish Paul was not quite so slow and timid. I wish Nacht did not look so dark and serious, and Smith so preoccupied. I wish it was not so beastly hot. . . .

"Mr. Gystak is quite a nice man. I do hope the *Stuttgart Tageblatt* will give him a lot of money, as they promised, if ever we get back to earth and he prints the story of the flight and sells his photographs."

The book fell out of the leader's hand. His friend, Gystak, was still in the employ of the *Stuttgart newspaper*! That was the reason he had joined the expedition! He was here as a journalist, not as a pilot, but he knew he would have to act as pilot, otherwise they would not have found room for him!

Guidance had always had complete confidence in Gystak.

He picked up the book again, but, after a moment's hesitation, he closed it firmly. He was frightened of learning any more.

His mood of amused curiosity had vanished; he felt despair and bitterness at this deception practised by Gystak, his former friend.

At dawn there was a tremendous bustle and confusion in the camp within the clearing. Everyone had awakened with a start, their dreams roughly disturbed, and those who were able had sprung from their beds with a shout.

What was the screaming and roaring which filled the heavens, and deafened their ears? The disabled peered about, while the others searched the sky with prismatic glasses. The roaring noise stopped suddenly,

and only the whining and shrieking continued. It was unnatural and alarming.

The Arionians gathered in a cluster, and pointed with all their arms at the zenith. Dickens jerked his head and pointed also unable to speak.

A huge object broke through the base of the blue clouds, and descended with frightful speed in a flat spin.

The Soaring Rocket No. III !

Where had it been ? Who controlled it ? If they did not control the spin, she would crash into the trees and burst into flames. Round and round, round and round, it went. The onlookers shuddered as they heard the whistling of the air getting louder.

Half a mile from the tree-tops, the spiral ended and the machine entered a stable glide. Soon the external-combustion engine was firing again.

Guidance, Dickens, Miss Ilse, and Gystak climbed a bank to get a better view while Grindin and the rest remained to look after the injured.

The soarer dipped to acknowledge that they had been seen. Then it circled.

Guidance was consumed with curiosity and doubt ; he could not understand it at all. Perhaps Dr. Nacht and the others had escaped the attackers, or were the attackers pursuing ? The pilot was evidently clumsy ; Gystak should have been on board—he would not have stalled her.

Guidance had built the soarer, and he watched it with straining eyes. It was a dead calm day, and he wondered how they would manage the landing ; no wind meant a speed approaching a hundred and fifty miles an hour, and an extra long run before coming

to rest ; it was the most difficult of conditions. He was anxious. The girl watched eagerly, to see if she could catch a glimpse of her father.

The soarer dropped a smoke-bomb, to find the direction of the wind ; it burst, and the smoke rose straight up. Then the ship circled uncertainly.

At last the pilot decided to land and cut off the engine. The soarer came down from five hundred feet in a rapid glide. The pilot was descending too fast. He realised this, fired the engine, and circled again.

He cut off, and once more approached, but at a steadier pace : at a hundred and fifty-five miles an hour, just above stalling-point. The soarer lost height with a clumsy S-turn.

"I wish I were up there !" exclaimed Gystak impatiently ; he and the relief-pilot were the only earthmen on Arion competent to land and take-off.

The machine neared the ground and began to flatten out. Guidance, his eyes intent, pushed forward and stroked his chin with his hand. The man had flattened out too soon. For a moment the machine hovered almost motionless, then it stalled and the nose dropped to the ground with a terrible crash.

Guidance ran forward with a gurgling cry, as the fuel tanks exploded and poured their contents over the hot engine, which caught fire. A figure was seen to jump from the soarer, and stagger a few yards, his hands over his head.

"Hesker !" shouted Dickens. Flames leaped and roared. Part of the metal engine dripped to the ground, a white-hot liquid.

By the greatest good fortune, Guidance and his companions were able to reach the blazing machine while the flames were still confined to the rear. They dragged out the unconscious bodies of Nacht and Lieben.

A few minutes passed, and the flames died down, revealing the twisted framework which had cost so many thousands to build.

The rescuers were unable to think ; they were utterly stunned. Mechanically they attended to Nacht and Lieben, and to Hesker, who was badly burned, and would need much medical attention. The rescuers themselves, under the extreme tension, were not aware of their own burns.

Guidance was unable to speak or to do anything. He stood as near to the smouldering wreckage as the fierce heat would allow, and began slowly to realise just what this disaster meant.

He was ruined financially, but that was nothing in their present desperate position.

They were doomed to spend the rest of their lives on Arion, for all hope of return to the earth was dead. They could never build another soarer, as they had no technical equipment, no workshops, no constructional engineers. The rare chance of a rescue expedition from the earth was not to be considered.

Guidance staggered as the full force of the situation struck him ; he could hardly tear himself away from the scene of the disaster. The others led him away and tried to console him, but it was mockery, for they themselves had as yet barely grasped what it meant to them.

The debris smouldered for hours, and the ground

nearby burnt the feet for a whole day. It was no use standing morbidly watching it, so everyone returned to the camp, and no attempt was made to conceal their despair.

Looking very much out of place, the grey Arionians wandered silently in and out of the camp.

Except Hesker, everyone recovered consciousness in a few hours; he had been caught by one of the bursting tanks, and was badly injured. Guidance, resigned to the prospect of a lifetime on the blue planet, went to see the doctor, who was lying comfortably on an Arionian mat under a shade.

Nacht raised himself and groaned. Guidance thought it was with pain, but it was with remorse.

"Do you feel like telling me what happened, Doctor?"

"How can I ever express—it is no use apologising——"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Haven't you guessed?"

"Nacht, I am at a loss. Guessed what?"

"It was dreadful after you left, dreadful. I told you at the time about my premonition, Mr. Guidance—I was certain you would never return. I wish to convince you of this—I was morally certain I should never see you again. How can I make you believe that?"

"Please do not work yourself up. Whatever happened, it is past and done."

"Somehow, what I felt spread to the others. Hesker was in complete agreement with me all along. Ask his opinion, and he will tell you——"

"Hesker is badly hurt. He has not yet recovered consciousness."

"After you had left, there was absolutely nothing to do. We sat or walked about, wondering how long you would be. For some reason, our nerves were affected by the inactivity. At times I gave way to my unfortunate temper, and the heat—you know.

"Lieben suggested a stroll through the outskirts of the forest, to see if there were any signs of your return. 'They will never return,' whispered Hesker gloomily, and I agreed with him, but we went. We had not gone far when we were startled by a faint ghostly sound, which echoed in a confined manner. It was like a rifle-crack. We looked at one another, puzzled. Then Hesker, Lieben and I set off in the direction. We proceeded for two miles, but saw nothing unusual. Then, by heaven, we all heard the horrible sobbing and groaning. It was not loud, but very distinct. We shivered with fright, we turned pale."

Guidance smiled grimly, and cut short the narrative with a brief explanation.

"Ah, it was our four poor companions in the pits. If only we could have found them !

"You can readily imagine, Guidance, what a state we were in. We searched about, but found nothing. At last, trembling, we fled from the forest, and heard some more of the ghostly sounds before passing out. The horrible mutterings and cries seemed to come from our very feet. It was like something—buried. We were well-nigh demented when we got back to the soarer. Try to see our position through our eyes. Without trying to pay a compliment, I mean it

when I say that we lacked the steady influence of your presence and leadership.

"Hesker and I stood near the machine, discussing nervously. Herr Lieben alone retained an amount of calmness which astonished us. All at once there was a crashing and trampling from the jungle, and a *Lämmchen* came galloping at a fast pace across the plateau. Behind it was another. Something had irritated them, we knew not what. They came straight for us and their destructive intentions were plain.

"Without delay, we bundled into the soaring machine, and we would have taken off then, if it had not been for Lieben. He shouted us down. 'Don't be silly,' he said. 'They won't harm us in here.'

"He was right, but it did not calm our thoughts to see those huge double-headed beasts running round us in circles. Then Hesker came to me. 'Doctor,' he said, 'what is the use of waiting any longer? For my part, I am convinced that everyone is already dead. That haunted forest is no place for man. If we go back, now, we might reach the earth, but not if we stay any longer.' Although I felt that he was right, my conscience told me to wait longer, and I argued with him.

"A few minutes later, the unaccountable thing happened, the final blow which was to deprive us of all self-control. It will seem absurd, but hear me out. I am not trying to find excuses for our conduct. Lieben himself will bear me out, if you ask him.

"From the blue cloud above, an intensely brilliant red beam of light appeared at a sharp angle, and enveloped the whole plateau. To our startled eyes, everything seemed dripping with blood. Our faces

were ghastly. It was the sudden change from blue to vivid red, I think, which made the effect more profound. None of us could think clearly in that moment. 'Let's get out of here !' shouted Hesker, and he and I began preparing for the ascent. Lieben expostulated and shouted at the top of his voice. Fools, we did not listen to him. I gave him a push through a door, he fell into a room, and I locked it, hardly aware of my unpardonable action.

"We were no longer reasonable creatures, but were swept away by fear—fear made us do mad things. Hesker fired the engine, and in a moment we had taken off. When we had passed through the blue mists, and left the atmosphere entirely, the quiet of space calmed me, and I began to see things in a different light. I suggested to Hesker that we should turn back and make a search for you, not landing, but remaining in the soarer. 'At least,' he replied, 'let us discover how far off the earth is first.' It was apparent that the madness was also leaving him.

"I looked round for the sun, so as to get our bearings. 'Confound it,' I said, 'where the deuce is the sun ?' We rose higher, and in desperation made a complete circuit of the planet. And, you know, there wasn't the least trace of the sun to be found anywhere !"

Guidance stared at Nacht, thunderstruck.

"You mean——"

"We searched everywhere, and swept the heavens with our instruments. It is ridiculous, impossible, if you like, but there was no sun to be seen, nor anything like it. For a long time we hovered, perplexed, pondering on this insanity of the universe. Had we

both gone mad? That occurred to us. Then we turned back; there was nothing else to do. It goes without saying that there was no indication of the earth, or of any other planet. What do you make of that?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE EXECRABLE COMPANY

HENRY GUIDANCE could make nothing at all of the mystery. Their bodies had been cast on the blue planet, there to remain till they died, and it seemed that their minds were to be tortured by every kind of perplexity. They were not even given the consolation of comprehending their fate. They were like children—they could not understand the simplest, most elementary things in their environment.

Always in the background of their consciousness were the many mysteries of Arion irritating and annoying, from the mysteries of the planet as a whole, down to little trivial things. Now, to cap all, they had lost the sun ! Guidance felt himself confronted by the symbolic figure of Nature, concealing a rather malignant grin behind the veil.

“ Really,” he said, “this is too much. . . .”

On the second night after the soarer had been burnt out, Guidance was sitting on a mat, gloomily eating some biscuits. He was resigned to his destiny ; he knew that no hope remained. He was fatigued with thinking over insoluble problems, and he allowed his mind to relax. He saw himself enthusiastically constructing his first venture, the *Soaring Rocket No. I.*

He recalled how horrible had been his dismay when it ignited and fell into the Atlantic. His mind turned back and he remembered how his beautiful *No. II* had been shattered by an explosion. Now *No. III*, with its vastly improved external-combustion engine, was a twisted smouldering skeleton of oxidised metal.

Was this the end of his achievements? The spirit of Santos-Dumont rose up in him. He would work, and work hard, till he had sufficient money for a fourth attempt. Perhaps a change of name would change his luck. *The Guidance* would be good. . . . Tim would be pleased with *that* name. It occurred to him that he was fonder of Tim than he had thought.

The sudden sight of a two-headed monster, staring at him from behind a tree, made him realise that he was no longer on earth, where he could earn money, buy workshops and material, and indulge in such luxuries as youthful cousins.

He looked round at the circle of his companions, the people who were doomed to live with him till they breathed their last breath of Arionian air.

They were sitting or lying around a low fire in the centre of the clearing, in a gloomy silence. All who had come with him were there, except the two dead—Nameless and a mechanic. Hesker was there, lying down and very much bandaged; Monday also was standing inside the circle, his three arms swaying solemnly and gently. Occasionally a tree-man would come out of the forest and stand looking at the group.

Grindin was seated directly opposite. The leader looked across at him, intently and moodily. Whether his regard for Ilse had changed his character, he was not now trying to conceal his emotions; he had ceased

to worry about the opinions of other people, his face and his being were full of despair.

At the extreme right and left were Dickens, and Alfred Smith, the surgeon from the Isle of Wight, one of the unfortunates who had fallen into the pits; this latter had suffered severe abrasions to his left knee. Both were staring morbidly and fixedly at the ground.

Next to Dickens sat his employer, Mr. Hergesheimer. Such had been the rush of events, and the culmination of disaster, that Guidance had almost forgotten that the New Zealander had tried to steal Lieben's plans. Herr Lieben himself had hardly spoken to Hergesheimer since he had caught him. It was remarkable to note that all the joviality had not yet died out of Hergesheimer's expression.

Dr. Nacht was next to Hergesheimer; his dark face did not seem graver than usual, but then it never revealed his thoughts.

The pilot, Gystak, and Hesker, the Czech, were seated between Grindin and Smith, and shared the general gloom. Lieben and his daughter were conversing in quiet tones a few yards away.

The silence was broken in a startling manner by a low laugh which made everyone look up. It was from Alfred Smith, the surgeon.

"Well," he said, with a grim smile, "I'm the only one who's getting what he wanted."

Everyone stared at him curiously.

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Guidance.

"Do you know the reason why I came on this expedition?" continued Smith calmly. "I'll tell you—it was in order to commit suicide."

He paused a moment and looked round at his fellow explorers.

"You see, I was, and I am, wholly tired of life and living, and I was determined to depart from life somehow. But I did not wish to create a scandal, so I chose this ingenious way. I would come to Arion, and—lose myself. People would think I had succumbed to the perils of the blue planet. Now—well, the disaster to the soarer has relieved me of the necessity of committing suicide."

The astonished expressions on their faces changed to horror.

"So you see," he repeated, "I'm the only one who is getting what he wanted."

Abruptly Dickens stood up and laughed out loud. Everyone turned and looked at him.

"You're wrong there," he said. He began walking nervously and restlessly to and fro. "I suppose I may as well tell you," he went on: "Our lives are as good as finished here and now. It will pass the time. It really concerns my wife. It was two years ago when first I met her, and less than five months later I proposed. I married her under false pretences, financially speaking. It was really a criminal thing to do, and I have no excuse whatever for doing it. I said I had such-and-such, but I hadn't. Very soon she found out.

"She was outraged, but she could not obtain a divorce for that; she was too frightened of public opinion to suggest a separation. Instead, she took a more subtle revenge by nagging me continually. Before I married her I knew that she was expensive, but I did not realise just how much she loved luxuries.

After a few months I came to realise this very clearly, and it dawned on me also how vile and stupid it had been of me to marry her at all, my financial position being what it was. I will not harass you with details of the stages through which I passed.

"The criminal extent of my misdoings began to prey upon my mind, and I looked about for means of righting the wrong. I realised I was entirely responsible for the whole thing. Then, one day, I went to an insurance company, one of the modern kind which insures for everything except suicide. Here was one way to settle matters—to relieve her of my obnoxious presence, and to establish her financially. I began a search for the most risky and perilous job I could find. . . . Mr. Hergesheimer advanced me money enough and I came on this expedition, as I felt certain none of us would ever get back alive. As you see, I was right!"

Dickens stopped walking and gazed into the dying fire. There was an interval of silence during which nothing stirred. Then a thought seemed to strike him.

"But if——" he began. "Well, it is just possible that a rescue party may reach us from the earth. I am certain it won't, but it is conceivable. In that case, and if anything were to—happen to me, I feel sure I can rely on those present not to—er—betray my confidence?"

Guidance stepped forward, as if rousing himself from a dream.

"Stop!" he cried. "Good God, have we all gone mad?"

"Mad!" repeated a deep voice, with a curious

intonation. Dr. Nacht had risen to his feet and was confronting the leader.

"Have you any conception, Mr. Guidance, of the true reason why I came on this trip?"

The leader stepped back, bewildered.

"Mr. Guidance, I have hidden it so far, but I must tell you that, at times, I am not responsible for my actions. Indeed, I may go so far as to admit that, before I could join the expedition, I had to escape from—a certain place. As a matter of fact, I suffer occasionally from acute—derangements."

Nacht made a significant pause.

Everyone thought of his unpardonable behaviour in causing the disappearance of the soarer.

"It was during one of these attacks that I applied for a berth on the *Soaring Rocket No. III*. Indeed, I find it hard to believe that anyone in his senses would come on such a mad trip. I might add that I do not come from Frankfort-on-the-Oder, but Brunswick."

Hesker, the Czech, burst into roars of laughter.

"Well," he said, "since confidences seem to be in the air, how about this one?"

He fumbled among the bandages about his neck, and produced a small cloth bag. Opening this he took from it what appeared to be a singularly beautiful pearl necklace, and held it up in his hand.

"See this?" he exclaimed. "It is the necklace of the Gräfin von Freiburg! What do you think of that? Do you know who I am, Mr. Guidance? I am Jonathan Gorstein, the jewel robber, and I came on this trip in order to evade justice, till this affair blows over. Thieves can be amateur astronomers as well as anyone else, you know."

Sensation no longer affected Guidance. He turned in an ironical manner to the pilot.

"Well, Mr. Gystak, you haven't favoured us with your particular reason for coming!"

Gystak blushed, but said nothing.

So this was the miserable end to his expedition? mused Henry Guidance. He thought he had found a worthy crew, worthy of the great scientific adventure of the flight to Arion, and this was what their real natures were!

Grindin had come by accident, because he was drunk at the time; Ilse had come because she wished to "hook" Grindin; Smith and Dickens had come, the one to commit suicide, the other because he was certain he would never return; dead Gwilym Thomas to commit a murder; Gystak, because he was paid by his paper; Nacht, because he was mad; "Hesker" Gorstein, to escape justice; and Hergesheimer, to steal the designs of Lieben's engine.

What a collection of scientific enthusiasts!

Guidance felt that both his manhood and his dignity were failing him, that he was being humbled and made ridiculous. He felt that he would never again be surprised at anything.

"Dickens is the most sordid," he thought bitterly. "Flying to Arion merely to allow his wife to collect insurance money!"

But there was one to whom he could turn with a firm certainty, upon whom he could depend as on a rock. One of whose scientific enthusiasm there could be no doubt, the only man remaining whom he could regard as a fit companion—Herr Obergeringenieur Lieben!

On an impulse Guidance left the low-flickering fire and walked to where Otto Lieben and his daughter were talking in low engrossed tones, as yet unaware of anything unusual.

"Excuse me," he said with a certain eagerness, "will you pardon me if I ask you a rather intimate question, Herr Lieben?"

The engineer raised his head and made a gesture of assent.

"Tell me this, Herr Lieben—if you do not think the question impertinent—can you give me the exact reason why you wished to accompany this expedition to Arion?"

"Do you want me to answer frankly, Mr. Guidance?"

"If, for any cause, you are unable to give a frank answer, I would much rather you did not answer at all."

"Well, to speak the truth, this is why I was so keen on coming: You see, when I put my new fuel into its final form, I was not entirely satisfied with it. I felt certain I could do even better; but I had not sufficient experimental data; I had not had time for that. Now, if I came on this flight I should have plenty of opportunity to observe my fuel under actual working conditions. I should be able to see, perhaps, just how the fuel could be improved, and so I would get a bigger price for my labours. Believe me, I want all the money I can get. My daughter and I have suffered long enough upon a miserably small salary. Ah, Mr. Guidance, you should see the countless, the endless, notes and observations and measurements I have made during this trip! But I forgot. Alas, my new engine, my fuel, my notes, are all burnt to cinders now!"

Guidance turned away.

Lieben after money ! The man who had made the very life-blood of the soarer !

Alone, the leader sat down on the bare ground, with his back against a tree. His mind was peculiarly lucid, but he felt that he had lost all his emotions.

So there was no one left now, he thought bitterly. He even began to doubt his own fidelity to science, and tried to analyse his thoughts and motives.

Suddenly, in a flash, it came to him how absurd was this talk of scientific progress, how empty and futile the "nobility" of scientific purpose and endeavour. What was the use of this flight to Arion ? Even if they had got back safely to earth, the most they would have accomplished would be to learn a few material marvels from the Arionians. In the end, what would it mean—to shoot yourself through the skies at a kilometre an hour faster than man had ever done before, to hear a voice across the world louder and clearer than man had ever heard before, to destroy, with a war-weapon, a larger number of soldiers, at less expense—what was the point of it all ?

He realised the insignificance of all physical science, except in so far as it helped to make human beings a little happier, amuse or enlighten them, or satisfy the spirits of curiosity or adventure.

He realised the vanity of abstract scientific ideals, the squabbling after facts, merely because they were facts, the belief in the necessity of increasing mechanical efficiency. He realised the idiocy of this glorification of curiosity, revered as science—with a capital S.

Suddenly, he ceased to regard Lieben as an engineer, Grindin as a geologist, Hergesheimer and Dickens as astronomers, Nacht as a doctor, Gystak as a journalist, Smith as a surgeon ; he saw them all as human men. It seemed that it had just occurred to him that each one of these was that most wonderful of remarkable things, a human individual, with a brain and free will. He felt somehow that he had just got to know them.

He wondered how it was he had never realised before that human personality was the only thing of fundamental importance. A new faith came to him to replace the old that had been shattered—a faith in the worth of human endeavour for its own sake, apart from the material attainments involved, a faith in the nobility of human co-operation, the supremacy of man's spirit over his environment.

They would work together ! Together they would wrest from Arion her thousand maddening secrets—solve the mystery for themselves, not for the knowledge it would give them, but for the joy of the effort !

They would record their discoveries on durable materials, write a library of books on their adventures, enshrine it in a temple of their own building—perhaps in a hundred years or a thousand years the blue planet might again come into juncture with the earth, and a more happily destined soarer might accomplish a safe landing : their library would be salvaged and their pioneering given full credit : that possibility would serve as their sufficient reward ! Future historians would describe them as the first explorers to have investigated a heavenly body other than the moon. Their names would always be remembered, as being linked with the event that had so narrowly failed in

compassing the destruction of the world. It was no mean thought that even at this moment their names would be on the lips of every Terrenian.

Filled with a new and pleasurable exultation, Guidance rose and rejoined his comrades.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE AMAZING SOLUTION

ABOUT half an hour later, when Guidance had completely recovered control over himself, he felt his old scientific curiosity returning to him. Disaster was so utterly complete that he had nearly stopped worrying about their fate, since hope seemed useless. He saw that the group round the fire had broken up, and also that Monsieur Grindin and Ilse appeared to have been busy.

They came up to him, with fat note-books in their hands.

"Monday has been giving us some very thorough lessons in Arionian," said Fräulein Lieben, "and we feel we can tackle anything together. We thought you might like to draw up a list of questions to ask the Arionians. It would be a pleasure for us ; you've no idea how fascinating their symbols are when they become *wohlbekannt*."

"Certainly," said Guidance, and began to think.

Soon he had compiled a formidable list of questions for poor Monday to answer, then Grindin and Ilse Lieben took them and set to work. Guidance could not restrain showing his impatience, but went to them frequently, to ask how they were getting on.

At first they appeared to be having some trouble in

making Monday understand what they wanted, but when at last they started, they proceeded rapidly.

Guidance paced to and fro with nervous strides. What strange unearthly knowledge would be disclosed? What incredible solutions to incredible mysteries, what dazzling glimpses of Arionian inspiration and invention? The levitation made it clear that they had control over gravitation. Was this secret to be revealed, and were they to learn the nature of the paralysing ray? Perhaps, also, they had sounded mystical depths, and had the key to philosophical paradoxes? There was no reason why this branch of knowledge should not be advanced, as well as others. They might even understand the Secret of the Purpose of the Universe. The very existence of Arion in the first place was fantastic, and the explanation must be equally so.

He watched them writing their symbols with growing excitement. What was the substance of those replies? So far as he was concerned, it might be anything; though he thought he had a faint glimmering of what it might be.

At last they had it all taken down, and some translated, but they were too tired to do more that day. Guidance fumed, and his mind became a blur with anticipation. He found it difficult to sleep that night.

In the morning the translators seemed to be startled over something, and they had another long consultation with Monday, as if to confirm their work.

Then, two hours after breakfast, they came to Guidance, in a state of indescribable excitement, and handed him the replies without saying a word. He glanced at them, and dropped the paper in his utter

amazement. Then he sat down and read slowly and intently. He could not restrain an impulse to leap into the air.

Finally, he gathered together every surviving member of the expedition, and read the replies aloud, in a voice that was hoarse and trembling with excitement.

"Fräulein Lieben's queries," he said, "were put at my suggestion. She has asked the Arionians a number of questions, and has written down the rough equivalents of the replies. I think you will find them sensational. Here they are :

"Where is the centre of Arionian civilisation ?

"There is no centre.

"What do the Arionians eat ?

"The Arionians do not eat anything.

"At times we have experienced a complete loss of weight. By what means have you obtained control over gravity ?

"The Arionians have no control over gravity.

"How was it that, a few days ago, the whole vast mass of Mount Levitation became flat ?

"Mount Levitation did not become flat.

"How did it come about that, in failing to collide with the earth, Arion disobeyed the laws of celestial mechanics ?

"Arion did not disobey the laws of celestial mechanics.

"When is the rainy season in this part of Arion ?

"There is no rainy season.

"In what direction lies the nearest sea or lake ?

"There are no seas or lakes.

"How is it that Dr. Nacht, a short while ago, failed to find the sun ?

"There was no sun to find.

"How could it be that the planet Arion was never seen on earth before this juncture?

"Arion is not a planet."

Guidance paused, and a roar of laughter rose from the camp. He looked about him in surprise. Was it possible that he had no sense of humour? Soon, out of respect, the laughter died down, and the leader continued.

"Friends, listen to the next!" There was a curious earnestness in his voice which necessitated attention, and which made everyone forget the embarrassing confessions of the previous night. "There follow a number of questions which Monday has grouped together, to be answered by one reply, such as 'What was the brilliant light we saw before plunging into Arion's atmosphere?' 'What is the purpose of the various metal structures we have seen?' 'What was the red illumination commented upon by Dr. Nacht?' and so on. Here is a brief summary of the reply, which I think you will agree is rather sensational.

"Much of our mystification has been due to the natural mistake of regarding Arion as an ordinary planet. It is, strictly speaking, not a planet at all, but a colossal soaring machine. I see that some of you are smiling incredulously. It is certainly rather large, but why should we measure size by our own achievements? There is no absolute scale in the matter. Once the technical difficulties are overcome, the advantages of such a vast soarer are obvious. Journeys can be made indefinitely, in perfect comfort and safety, with no leaks to worry about and no collisions with cosmic rocks to fear, and ample room to stretch one's legs."

"If this is a soaring machine," said Dickens sarcastically, "I should like to know on what planet it was built."

"It was not built on a planet," replied Guidance, unwittingly imitating the Arionian style, and there was another burst of merriment. "In the direction of Betelgeuse, there is a large double star, invisible from the earth because it is cold. On one of these stars lives the Arionian race, and there they built 'the blue planet,' and sent it off on its remarkable flight. Their knowledge and technical power is so vast that they must regard us as having no more intelligence than cattle. Surely great knowledge must bring with it sympathy and tolerance, for never once has any of them displayed a superior manner to us. By their way of acting, you would think we were their equals. This shows them in a highly creditable light."

"What is the object of this tremendous structure, then?"

"They are travelling on a visit to the inhabitants of another system, several hundred light-years away. They have been in radio communication with them for a considerable time. What we took to be loss or gain of weight was simply the effect of acceleration and deceleration. The fuel-gases emerge from cylinders sunk in the ground. They can twist the soarer round by tangential tubes. It was this which seemed to alter the slope of the plateau, and make Mount Levitation appear flat. Also, of course, it altered the length of the day."

"I ask you," said Dickens, "does this look like a soaring machine? Look at those tumbled crags and disorderly forests."

"Nothing amiss in that. In their wisdom they may have planned it to be as natural as possible. They may even have a *flair* for the picturesque. It certainly looks like it. Again, their beasts of burden, the *Lämmchen*. . . . In any case, I rather imagine that the soarer is not entirely artificial, but was once a satellite which they partially hollowed out. They may have left the original scenery unchanged.

"For the most part, the Arionians only come to the outside surface of the soarer occasionally. Mainly they live inside. When they feel like it, they go for a stroll among the mountains. They do not care for sailing, so there are no lakes. All this land is one mass of artificial irrigation ; there are thousands of conduits under the forests. They like the air kept just saturated. The weather and even the lighting is under control."

Dickens dropped his sarcasm and became enthusiastic.

"But, Mr. Guidance, this is a perfect world ! No rain, no storms, everything arranged just as you please !"

"You are right there, Dickens. It is very much to be admired. Also natural calamities such as earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions, cannot, of course, take place."

"How about the flash we saw, and the red light ?" asked Nacht, raising himself on an elbow.

"They are wonderfully advanced in astronomy. They have an enormous telescope, sunk in the interior. There are two tubes at opposite sides of the globe—we have seen one of them—and two movable mirrors, supported above the blue mists, reflect light down them. It is nothing more nor less than a Michelson Stellar Interferometer, with a terrific aperture. With it

they can measure the diameter of almost any body in the heavens. They use infra-red light, which goes through the mist, but sometimes they clear the mist. Why the mist is there I do not know. Perhaps they like blue daylight. The red light noticed by the doctor was probably the reflection from the mirror of some operation they were carrying out elsewhere. It could not have been the sun, because we are now millions of miles from the solar system."

"Have you found out how they eat?" asked Gystak anxiously. It seemed to be the only thing that intrigued the pilot.

"They can only take in nourishment as a liquid, and this they do by sucking fluid through tiny holes in the ends of their arms. For the use of those who get stranded in the forests, they have occasional stores of liquid foods, which look like trees with indiarubber twigs. They imbibe the food by fitting their arm-tips in the rubber tubes."

"Exquisite!" exclaimed Gystak, well satisfied.

"I suppose," said Dickens, thoughtfully, "that time I tried to steer my way by compass through the forest, and wandered in a complete circle, it was due to machinery or iron just under me."

"A difficulty, Mr. Guidance," said one of the mechanics. "It must be an inconceivably small chance which places our solar system directly between the Arionians' parent star and their destination."

"Our system is not directly between their parent star and their destination," said the leader, without the faintest trace of a smile, and further titters were caused by this persistent outbreak of the Arionian style. "They visited our system out of curiosity,

and they had to make a very wide *détour* in order to do it, but they were in no hurry."

"But surely, if they went to all that trouble to visit our system, why didn't they arrive on the earth and inspect it? They were so close, they must have been able to see that it was inhabited."

A cloud of annoyance passed over the leader's face, and for a moment he did not reply. He seemed to ponder over his answer carefully, as if it was a very delicate thing to say.

At last he dropped his head, as if ashamed.

"The truth of the matter is—well, you must remember that they are far beyond us in mental development. It is certainly correct that, with the help of their huge telescopes, they found out what kind of people were living on the earth, long before they reached the nearest point. And—well, they did not think the earth worth visiting!"

Everyone was disconcerted by this, and nothing more was said. Guidance did not like the undignified statement he had made, and bit his lip.

Mr. Dickens broke the uncomfortable silence.

"A moment," he said. "If these grey people inhabit the globe right to its very centre, then its population—shall I say the 'crew' of the soarer—must be very numerous?"

"It *is* numerous. Be prepared for a shock: the population of this great artificial planet is—five hundred billions!"¹

"*What!*"

"Isn't that a little crowded?"

¹ English system: billion=a million million.

"We've seen precious few of the five hundred billions so far!"

"Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"Just a moment, gentlemen—the simplest of calculations will show you that the figure is far from preposterous, I fancy. Herr Oberingenieur, lend me your slide-rule a moment.

"You remember one of the countless mysteries that confronted us was the fact that though Arion resembles the earth to some extent in outward appearance—and therefore one could reasonably expect its average density to be about the same as Earth's—yet its weight was one-tenth lighter than it ought to have been! We know now, of course, that the one-tenth deficit in mass is due to the excavations performed by the Arionian engineers, when converting the satellite into a soaring machine. Now I perceive from this slide-rule that a change in weight of one-tenth corresponds roughly to an alteration in the radius of one hundred and twenty-five miles: in other words, the capacity of the Arionian caverns equals that of a slice of the planet's surface—like the skin of an orange—a hundred and twenty-five miles thick.

"Now, the population of *our* globe, according to 1990 statistics, is in the neighbourhood of one billion, and you cannot say Earth is over-populated—consider also that the greater portion of the earth's surface is swamped by ocean!

"Let us suppose for simplicity that the Arionian engineers have constructed a series of spherical shells within Arion, one fitting inside another, and suppose also that we have a population equal to the earth's—one billion—distributed on *each* shell; five hundred

billion Arionians upon five hundred separate shells could be packed into the excavated layer a hundred and twenty-five miles deep, giving a quarter of a mile head-room for each shell ! Ample room—the population of Arion is really a very moderate figure after all—and plenty space left over for endless synthetic food factories ! ”

“ Ahem ! May I presume to ask if you know what the population of the mother-star is ? It must be colossal ! ”

“ If this translation is accurate, about seventy quadrillions, that is to say, seventy billion billions.”¹

“ Have mercy, Mr. Guidance ! We cannot conceive that—our ideas are far too limited.”

“ Does all this vast mass of living creatures exist together in harmony ? ”

“ Apparently so, more or less.”

“ What feats of diplomacy must have been endured ! What peaks of organisation must have been reached ! ”

“ Yet another proof of their sympathy and forbearance.”

The members of the expedition lay down on their beds that night incredulous and awed.

.

After this friendly exchange of questions and answers, they were led on a tour through “ the blue planet ” by the Arionians. They were taken into innumerable galleries, deeper and deeper down, until they reached the very centre of the globe itself, and lost all weight. They saw things whose meaning they could not grasp,

¹ 70,000,000,000,000,000,000,000

nor ever hope to grasp, but Monday and the other grey creatures showed not the slightest contempt.

Meanwhile, the Arionian engineers were fitting out a large soaring machine to take them back to earth; Arion was to slow down and wait for its return. It would have wasted enormous quantities of fuel to take them back on Arion itself. This machine was the one the Arionians would have used when landing on the earth; it had been put on one side when they had decided that it would only be a waste of time to visit a planet in such a primitive state of development.

Several days before they were due to start the journey back to earth, the bewildered party of Terrenians were conducted to the tremendous cavern, just below the surface of Arion, where their hosts' soaring machine was stored.

Guidance, the engineer, and his daughter, Grindin, and Gystak, were shown through the wonderful soarer by Monday, while the rest preferred to stroll round the vast hall, and watch the tree-men perform their complex tasks.

"Where on earth have they got the engines?" asked Lieben. "If they haven't put them in yet, where can there be room for them! I can't see any spare space. Liebling, will you ask Monday about it?"

"Right," said Ilse. "He says that the engines are there, father, at the end of this corridor. Here, in this room."

"*Herr Gott!* Mr. Guidance, do you see this? The engines, in this tiny space! They don't occupy one-tenth the space that the engines did in the *Soaring Rocket No. III!* A miracle of compactness! We've

got a lot to learn, a whole lot to learn. *Ach*, will their fuel supersede my fuel, I wonder ! ”

“ My word,” exclaimed his daughter, “ just come and have a glance at these marvellous windows.”

The group hastened to examine one of the wonderful windows, and they gasped with astonishment. They were indeed as perfect as windows could be ; the glass was so remarkably fashioned as to be invisible—there was no means of discovering its presence without actually touching it, or breathing upon it.

“ This beats anything I’ve ever seen,” said the leader, almost drunk with wonder.

“ I say, look into this room ! ” continued the excited Ilse.

They went through the half-open door and saw that the walls were covered with black-and-white caricatures of Arionian tree-men ; in addition, in the very centre of one of the walls, there was an extraordinarily good black-and-white portrait of—Henry Guidance himself ! Everything was there, massive frame and features, square jaw slightly exaggerated ! It was so unexpected that they could not help bursting into laughter—even the dignified leader himself was amused at his own likeness, despite the skilful caricature. Symbolically, below the feet of Guidance, there was a rolling earth set in clouds.

“ By the way, Ilschen,” said the engineer, “ I thought you told us that the Arionians don’t appreciate flat diagrams.”

“ Yes, that’s so, but I was asking scientific questions. They certainly seem to appreciate flatness so far as it applies to art. Now isn’t that drawing cute ? ”

“ It seems clear,” whispered Gystak to Grindin,

peering closely at the caricature, "that these Arionians have a well-developed sense of humour."

"I'll say they have! Look at that magnificent chin! It's the very expression of Guidance's soul—if he has one!"

When they had finished the interesting inspection, and the entire party was descending to the rooms assigned to them, the gloomy surgeon from the Isle of Wight, Alfred Smith, drew the leader aside and whispered to him:

"Do you remember all that rubbish I said, Mr. Guidance, about coming on this trip to do away with myself? Well, I'm very glad to say that's all over now—I'm completely cured! Man, the things we've seen! Who would want to die after seeing such wonders as these?"

Guidance looked at Smith closely. There was indeed a new freshness in his eyes, and his expression had changed to that of a youthful man. His voice was trembling with enthusiasm. A convert to optimism, by Arionian magic!

"That's just fine."

Smith moved away without adding another word, his face beaming.

On the day before they were due to depart from the blue planet, a most unfortunate incident occurred. Alfred Smith went to the surface alone, and thought he would enjoy the open air for a few minutes in one of the forest clearings.

When he did not return after an hour or so, they went out to see what had become of him. After some searching around the clearing, they stumbled upon his

body in the undergrowth. He had been killed by a stampeding *Doppel-Lämmchen*. . . .

"There seems to be something ironic in the very air of Arion," Guidance decided, when he had recovered from his dismay. "Just after he had announced himself as cured of his suicidal tendencies, one of those clumsy beasts must needs come along and trample on him."

It was ironic in another way also, to kill off a passenger when all their trials and desperations were over.

On the return journey back to their native earth, which they had given up all hope of ever seeing again, Guidance was talking with Herr Lieben in a room at the front of the Arionian soaring machine.

"You know," he said to the engineer, "I think we ought to forgive Mr. Hergesheimer for trying to steal your engine designs . . . he has been an immense help on this trip, and, after all, we are comrades in adventure now. Hesker, too. Don't you think we should ignore the fact that he is Jonathan Gorstein? He has been so valuable, and we all know him so intimately."

What could account for this sudden access of generosity and tolerance for a criminal? Had the recent tragic experiences and unexpected relief made the leader less stern, more merciful?

In point of fact the motive of his strange request was the very reverse of that which might appear at first sight to have been the cause. His remark was occasioned by a far from sympathetic attitude to either Hesker, *alias* Gorstein, or Hergesheimer.

The heroic environment of the blue planet had

worked all that was best in Guidance's character, but now that he was returning to earth, circumstances compelled his attention to certain sordid matters : he descended to intrigue, just as he had done once before during the "blue days," when he had taken advantage of the financial crisis to bring off a "shady deal." Now he was ruined financially by the destruction of his *Soaring Rocket No. III*; to mitigate this awkward situation, he had decided to stoop to blackmail, and his victims were to be Hergesheimer and Jonathan Gorstein. Naturally they would be of no use to him if they were gaoled, hence his wish to keep their crimes secret.

The engineer was puzzled at his leader's request ; he believed in strict justice ; moreover, he was still greatly indignant at the attempted theft of his plans. But Guidance had paid him a large sum of money for his services, and he did not like to go against his wishes.

With a worried frown he made a gesture of reluctant assent.

At that moment, without any warning, a shot suddenly resounded through every part of the vessel.

Guidance jumped to his feet.

"What the dickens——"

"You said it !" exclaimed Gystak, as he appeared in the doorway. "Mrs. Dickens is going to get her insurance money !"

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